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Kureha

Bride
of the
Barrier
Master





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Kureha

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NEW YORK

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Bride of the Barrier Master

KUREHA

Translation by Linda Liu ♦ Cover art by Bodax

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KEKKAISHI NO ICHIRINKA

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: January 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere, Payton Campbell

Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman, Wendy Chan

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kureha (Light novel author), author. | Liu, Linda (Translator), translator.

Title: Bride of the barrier master / Kureha ; translation by Linda Liu.

Other titles: Kekkaishi no ichirinka. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023-

Identifiers: LCCN 2022043316 | ISBN 9781975360528 (v. 1 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Romance fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K85 Br 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043316>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-6052-8 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6053-5 (ebook)

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Prologue

Here in Japan, there is a national secret closely guarded from all but a select few.

Truth be told, five pillars made of crystal have supported the island nation since time immemorial. The destruction of even one of the five would result in calamity.

It is no exaggeration to call the pillars the lifeline of the country, so they have always been strictly protected by five clans of old—Ichinomiya, Nijouin, Sankourou, Yotsukado, and Goyougi—each of which has a long and illustrious history of strong magic practitioners.

The clans wield a mystical power which allows them to weave protective barriers around the pillars. They have been guarding the country from its enemies for eons.

Enemies of the clans come in various forms.

First, other humans sometimes pose a threat. However, human adversaries can be dealt with using non-magical means.

The enemies targeting the crystal pillars that are neither human nor mortal are the most troubling.

Practitioners call them shades.

Shades desire the tremendous power of the pillars—capable of supporting an entire country—so their attacks are never-ending.

The sacred duty of the five clans and their branch families is to maintain the protective barriers around the pillars and fend off those with evil intentions.

Such is the truth behind the country's best-kept secret.

This is the story of a young woman who was born into one of the five great clans.

Chapter 1

The Ichise family was a branch of the Ichinomiya clan, one of the five great clans charged with protecting the pillars. Only a few privileged members of the family were privy to the significance of the Ichinomiya clan and their responsibility to protect the pillars.

Those few had gathered for a lavish celebration in honor of the fifteenth birthday of the twin sisters Hana and Hazuki.

On that day, destiny would change Hana's life forever.

Hana and Hazuki were seated next to each other in the seats of honor, but it was clear to Hana, the younger of the two, that her parents and their guests were there to celebrate *Hazuki's* birthday.

Their disinterest in Hana was blatant—she, too, was turning fifteen, after all, but over the course of her life, she had grown accustomed to the difference in treatment.

Her heart had become tranquil and placid ever since the day she had finally thrown away all her hopes and expectations for her family.

They despised her for failing to measure up to Hazuki's talents. Outwardly, she took their insults calmly, but on the inside, she taunted them right back. The expression she wore on her face might have been serene, but her inner self was making a funny face and blowing raspberries.

The last couple of years had twisted her personality, a fact that she knew very well.

Hana and Hazuki hardly ever spoke to each other.

In fact, the birthday party was their first time meeting in several days.

But forget seeing each other—when was the last time they had sat so close to each other? Hana certainly couldn't remember.

The slight loneliness at the thought and her deeply rooted

indifference toward her family were inextricably intertwined within her heart.

Hana looked over at her twin sister, who was the center of attention, as usual. Hazuki was busy dazzling her audience with her radiant, sunny smile. In comparison, Hana, whom everyone dismissed as Hazuki's scraps, sat quietly sipping her juice. She watched her twin with a cold gaze and detached admiration.

Popular as always, she thought.

Every single person in the room had high expectations for Hazuki. She was lauded as the perfect human being—bright, talented, and affable—the polar opposite of Hana.

Hana used to revere her sister, but she knew better now.

Hazuki's impeccable demeanor was nothing but a show, a veneer that only Hana could see through.

Hazuki's every expression was built on lies, starting with her smile, which was tailored to endear her to others.

In what way should she act to earn people's approval? Which words would make her look like the shining example of the perfect daughter? Everything Hazuki said and did was the result of precise calculations. Her entire existence was a farce.

In the past, her smile had been more genuine...

Hana wasn't the only one who had changed over the years.

The birthday party was nothing more than a flimsy excuse for everyone to gather and evaluate Hazuki's current power level. Hana was just starting to wonder when the sham of a party was going to end when *it* happened.

The guests at the party treated Hana as if she were invisible, and she was more than content to ignore them right back. She had a slice of cake on her plate, but neither the cake nor the day held any trace of the birthday mood.

In fact, she really hadn't done anything special that day. She might have overindulged a *tad* on fried chicken, but she was normally hearty and hale. Her health was a point of pride.

So when a burst of heat blazed through her body, it was completely unexpected. It was as if she had suddenly come down with a fever. Hana stiffened and froze under the abrupt assault.

The heat dissipated as fast as it came. The rapid cooling was accompanied by a cracking sensation from deep within her. She felt like something was being peeled open inside her like an egg from its shell...



The Ichinomiya clan was one of the five clans of barrier practitioners whose sworn duty was to protect the pillars supporting the nation.

The Ichise family used to be influential among the Ichinomiya branches and had once even been held in high regard by the lord of the Ichinomiya clan. However, the family hadn't produced many practitioners of real talent in recent memory, and the absence of worthy heirs had led to a decline in the family's reputation and standing.

Then twin daughters were born to the Ichise family.

From the moment she was born, Hana, the younger of the two, had been compared to her talented elder sister, Hazuki.

As twins, they looked almost identical, but their skill levels as practitioners were as different as night and day. People couldn't help but measure them against each other.

Hazuki had come into her powers at an early age. Her raw talent rivaled that of the main branch's practitioners, which garnered interest and attention from the twins' parents and relatives.

Their father in particular was dissatisfied with their family's standing and yearned to see their name restored to its former glory.

Because of these aspirations, he had high expectations for Hazuki's future.

But Hana, whose power had not grown stronger even as she aged, had been subjected to her parents' sighs of disappointment as a young girl—feeling her chest clench in pain with every sigh.

Hana had held on to the belief that she could be as strong as Hazuki—they were twins, after all—and had poured her heart and soul into her studies. She had undergone intense training in pursuit of becoming a powerful practitioner.

However, reality was cruel. Hana failed to improve. She was dismissed as Hazuki's tagalong at best and castoff at worst.

Though the twins looked alike, Hazuki's features were more elegant and beautiful, and she carried herself with maturity and grace even as a young girl. Her smile lit up the room like a flower bud coming into full bloom and drew the eyes of those around her.

With her talents and her bright, outgoing personality, it was only natural that she was loved by everyone. She was always surrounded by people and, inevitably, became the star of the show.

Hana was far from ugly, of course, but compared to her sister, her features seemed just a tad plain and adolescent. She was pretty but not beautiful.

Even their hair was different. Hazuki's brown hair fell in soft wisps around her face, whereas Hana's hair was jet-black and pin straight.

Unlike Hazuki, Hana was reserved and disliked drawing attention to herself. She observed Hazuki's entourage from afar. She found her too

blinding and nearly impossible to approach.

Hana was constantly pitted against her sister by those around them. More than that, she, too, couldn't help but compare herself to Hazuki, which only led to further disappointment.

But she hadn't thought of their relationship as bad, at least not in the early years of elementary school...

The increase of their parents' expectations on Hazuki had been accompanied by a decline of their interest in Hana, but Hazuki used to comfort Hana when she was blue.

Hana had been proud to have the kind Hazuki as her older sister.

At that time, the two of them had still spoken frequently, chatting freely about everything from school and friends to their respective sorrows and frustrations.

Hazuki used to confide in Hana that while the expectations placed on her made her happy, they were also a heavy burden to bear.

Hana, whom no one expected anything of, had thought that Hazuki's problems were practically luxurious.

Hazuki's favorable treatment could have easily bred the seeds of resentment, but strangely enough, Hana hadn't felt a shred of jealousy toward her older sister, which allowed the twins to stay on good terms.

But one day, a gap too wide to ignore formed between them.

It happened when they were ten, on the day they were to conjure their first shikigami.

Making a shikigami was considered the first test for those aiming to become practitioners. Children who could successfully produce one were brought into the fold by the household as apprentices.

Given the day's importance, relatives near and far had been called to the house to celebrate the occasion.

In the family's spacious garden, a pentagram had been inscribed on the ground. It was encircled by lit candles.

Hana and Hazuki stood before it, their faces stiff with nerves. The adults around them watched the two of them intently.

Shikigami were beings animated by the practitioner's power that acted in their master's stead. They were said to be a representation of the practitioner's identity.

The strength and appearance of the shikigami reflected the strength of its master.

The shikigami that were the cream of the crop could even speak and intuit their masters' desires.

Hana, who had few allies in her family, was delighted at the idea of having a friend of her own, someone who would stay by her side and never betray her.

But when she summoned her shikigami, it took the form of a lowly

butterfly.

Sure, the butterfly was beautiful and had rainbow wings, but it was well known that insects were the weakest of all shikigami.

Hana was alone in her joy at having made her first shikigami. When her parents saw her shikigami, their last sliver of hope for her crumbled to nothing. She could tell by their expressions the moment they gave up on her completely, and it cut her to the quick.

Next to a dismayed Hana, Hazuki summoned her own shikigami.

Her shikigami took the form of a human, the most powerful and desirable of all shikigami.

The crowd roared with excitement.

Hazuki's shikigami was just a boy—around the same age as the twins. Nevertheless, even practitioners in the main clan had trouble producing a human shikigami.

The twins had an older brother named Yanagi. He was talented and had a promising future ahead of him, but he had not been able to accomplish what Hazuki had just done.

Therefore, it wasn't strange at all that the twins' parents and brother started to heap praise upon Hazuki for her feat.

But...

Hana had been cast aside entirely. She stood alone, forgotten by everyone. Hana's butterfly came fluttering over to her lonely figure.

"Are you comforting me?" Hana asked, even though, unlike Hazuki's shikigami, the butterfly would not be able to speak.

However, though a proper conversation was impossible, Hana could somehow sense that her shikigami was worried for her.

"Thanks," she said. "You'll always be here for me, right?"

The butterfly alighted on her shoulder as if to agree. The shikigami would stay by her side long after she'd been abandoned by everyone else.

Hana was almost moved to tears.

"That's right! I have to give you a name. What should it be?" she mused.

Then the perfect idea struck her.

"How about Azuha? It's just right for a beauty like you."

The rainbow-hued butterfly showed its pleasure by fluttering around Hana.

A companion just for her.

To Hana, Azuha was an irreplaceable friend whether or not they could speak to each other.

Tragically, the day that Hana found a companion in Azuha was also the day the distance between her and Hazuki widened, and all their former intimacy was forgotten.

From that day on, their parents placed all their hopes on Hazuki and

gave her all their attention. They hired first-rate practitioners to tutor Hazuki exclusively and further nurture her talents. When Hana said that she wanted to study, too, their parents berated her, saying, “Don’t get in your sister’s way!”

And that was the end of that.

Hana had no choice but to crack open her books and study on her own.

Meanwhile, Hazuki was tutored in a variety of additional subjects and arts. So the gap between the twins continued to grow.

Now that Hana’s parents were ignoring her completely in favor of her sister, it was a blessing that the family still had servants who took care of her. Thankfully, as a branch of the Ichinomiya clan, who were pivotal to the country’s continued existence, Hana’s family was affluent. Had they not been, her family might even have forgotten to feed her.

The fact that there was a real possibility her parents would’ve let her starve was proof of the stark difference between how she and Hazuki were treated.

As for their brother, Yanagi, he was an expressionless man of few words whose thoughts were completely inscrutable to Hana.

Even that stern man had cracked a rare smile when Hazuki conjured a human shikigami, but he hadn’t spared a single glance at Hana when she produced Azuha. Yanagi’s thoughts might not have shown on his face, but Hana could sense that, like their parents, he didn’t care about her one bit.

Possibly because of that understanding, Hana had always felt uneasy around her brother and avoided him as much as she could. They might have lived under the same roof, but they hadn’t spoken in years.

Unfortunately, she found herself gradually distanced from her other half as well. Now that she was studying under an army of tutors, Hazuki was busier than ever, and the two of them stopped speaking to each other.

Before that point, they had always been able to find time for each other. Hana lamented the loss.

Once, she had gathered her courage to call out to Hazuki, but her mother stopped her before she could. Although Hazuki was still a child, her schedule was jam-packed. According to their mother, Hazuki didn’t have time to talk to the likes of Hana.

“Hana, Hazuki is different from you,” her mother spat. “Hazuki is the hope of our family. I won’t allow you to waste even a second of her precious time with your meaningless chatter.”

Hana had no choice but to reply woodenly, “...I understand, Mother.”

The only recourse left to Hana was to pray that Hazuki would approach her instead, but even when they ate together as a family, Hazuki only ever spoke with their parents. She never said a single word to Hana.

Once they entered middle school, focusing on their studies made them both even busier. Hazuki started taking her supper in her room with their mother sticking by her side. Their father was busy; Hana almost never saw his face. Yanagi, who was a full decade older than the twins, became a full-fledged practitioner. His work kept him away from the house. He rarely came home at all.

Hana was left all alone.

When she ate by herself at the massive dining table, all the food tasted like ash in her mouth. She couldn't enjoy anything she ate. To ease her loneliness, Hana started bringing her meals to her room, too.

Hana didn't understand how their family had ended up this way.

Until a short while ago, she had felt the difference between how she and her sister were treated, of course, but she had still considered herself to be one of the family.

Now she wasn't even sure there was a family to be a part of.

No matter how much she wanted to deny it, she couldn't. Their family had fragmented into pieces.

Could this all be my fault? she wondered to herself.

If only she weren't so weak.

If only she were as outstanding as Hazuki.

But in the end, there was nothing she could do.

She couldn't help but find everyone ridiculous—their parents, who were obsessed with power; Hazuki; and herself, most of all.

Hana thought back to one day in middle school.

Since she had no tutors to help her with her studies, she threw everything she had into independent study. That day, she had gotten back her test results.

She was confident that she had done well on the test, and her score corroborated her expectations. She had scored a full ninety points, which was well above the average.

Delighted and proud, she brought her test to show her father, but she was met with an icy glare.

"Why didn't you get one hundred?" he admonished. "This is why I say you are no good. Hazuki received full marks, just like she always does, and yet you're satisfied with this measly result? You should learn from your sister. Your talents as a practitioner are already nonexistent."

Hana had thought she would be praised, but she was harshly scolded instead. She fought back the tears that threatened to spill.

"The least you could do is keep up with Hazuki in academics," her

father concluded.

“...I apologize,” Hana said.

With the flames of her joy and excitement rudely extinguished, Hana returned to her room dejected.

Azuha flew over and stopped, hovering at eye level to comfort Hana.

One of the family servants, an older woman named Sae, entered her room as well.

The servants of the household sympathized with Hana, abandoned as she was by her parents, and fussed over her in her parents’ stead.

Sae was her main caretaker.

Hana loved Sae. The woman was older than Hana’s mother, and her hair was starting to go white. She always had a kind smile ready for Hana.

Sae came into Hana’s room with a tray bearing a slice of cake. She set the tray softly on the table. The cake was topped with *Congratulations!* written with chocolate.

“What’s this, Sae?” Hana asked.

“It’s a reward for your excellent exam results, Miss Hana,” Sae replied.

Her parents hadn’t given her a word of praise, but Sae had been considerate enough to prepare a cake.

“You’ve worked hard, Miss,” she continued.

“But Father said I’m useless...,” Hana mumbled.

Even saying it aloud hurt. She knew it was true.

What could Hana do to make her mother and father take notice of her?

She had thought and thought, but she had never found the answer. One’s skills as a practitioner were innate. They couldn’t be improved through mindless effort.

Seeing Hana so miserable, Sae tried to cheer her up.

“The useless ones are your parents, who fail to see their child’s efforts. Wash your hands clean of them,” Sae advised.

Sae’s judgment was incisive. They weren’t words a servant should use to talk about her employers.

Hana was shocked.

“There’s no need for you to cater to your parents, Miss Hana.” Sae reached out and took Hana’s hand. Her hand was warm, and the smile she directed at Hana was filled with familial affection.

Hana was shaken by the kindness of that smile, an expression she had never seen on her own mother.

“There are people who are watching you, who *see* what you do. That includes me, of course,” Sae said. “Be true to yourself, Miss Hana, and live the way you want to.”

With that parting message, Sae exited the room, leaving the cake on the table.

Sae's words struck a chord in Hana's heart. Alone in her room, she felt the power of those words resonating within her.

Hana wanted her family to see her for who she was, and she had worked tirelessly to achieve that.

She wanted nothing more than for them to recognize her existence.

But in the end, everything she did amounted to kissing up to her parents to curry their favor.

"Ha. Hee-hee-hee." Inexplicably, she burst into laughter. If there had been anyone watching her, they would've thought she'd gone mad. But she couldn't stop. "Ah-ha-ha-ha... Haah..."

Once she had laughed herself to exhaustion, she flopped down onto the tatami-mat floor with a deep sigh and spread her limbs wide.

"No need to cater to them, huh...?" she muttered.

There was wisdom in those words.

No matter what she did, her parents always ended up comparing her to Hazuki. They had never once praised her accomplishments.

Besides, ever since they had stopped eating together as a family, Hana almost never saw her parents anymore. They were well on their way to becoming strangers who happened to share blood.

How long was she going to have to tiptoe around her parents?

Forever?

Her mind protested the thought. She didn't want that.

It was pitiful, wasn't it?

Knowing that her parents didn't care about her and would never care about her, yet continuing to chase after them in the hopes that one day they would.

Knowing in the back of her mind that they'd never turn to look her way...

How pathetic.

She hated that part of herself. She wanted to be free. She wanted to live the way she wanted without a second thought about anyone else's opinions.

It was foolish to allow other people's words and actions to dictate her happiness or despair.

She wanted to be able to be sincerely proud of herself. She had come so far.

Even if no one else recognized her efforts, she should at least be able to...

Hana's heart was suddenly as light as a feather.

She felt as if all the pain and sadness wracking her had been absorbed by something indescribable and condensed down into a hard lump.

All that was left was resignation and forgiveness.

From that point forward, Hana stopped caring about what her parents said to her and about other people's evaluations of her. She stopped trying to gain their approval.

Hana realized that she was plenty happy.

She had Azuha, didn't she? A partner that would stand by her no matter what.

She had attained so much. What was there for her to lament?

Freed from her shackles, Hana found it easier to breathe. She felt refreshed, like she had been reborn.

And she was able to turn an objective eye toward her own family.

Her thoughts turned to her other half, who had been with her since they were born.

Hazuki was her older twin sister, so they should have been similar, and yet they were not.

Hazuki was a practitioner immeasurably more powerful than Hana.

To Hana, who had always been told she was good for nothing, Hazuki was her pride and joy.

But when Hana stopped to reflect, she wondered if that was wise.

From Hana's perspective, Hazuki looked like she had been bound from head to foot by their parents' expectations. Her schedule was utterly uncompromising. Every day, she woke up and went to school. Once she came home, her schedule was jam-packed, and she didn't have a moment's rest.

Their parents were entrusting the fate of the family to Hazuki. From where Hana was standing, it looked like an oppressive existence.

Was Hazuki content?

Hana worried over these thoughts. Then, for the first time in a long time, she got the chance to speak with Hazuki.

"You don't have any extracurriculars today, Hazuki?" she asked her sister.

"The teacher is ill," Hazuki answered.

Hana felt a tinge of nostalgia. It had been ages since the last time they'd exchanged words, trivial as they were, with each other. She was genuinely happy to be able to speak with Hazuki, but Hazuki's attitude toward her felt cold and distant.

On top of that, Hazuki looked tired.

The question was out of Hana's mouth before she realized it. "Isn't it hard on you, Hazuki?"

"What are you saying all of a sudden?" Hazuki demanded.

"Your schedule is packed with back-to-back lessons and activities every single day. Aren't you tired? You have no time to relax at all," Hana said. "What if you asked Mother and Father for a bit of time for yourself? If it's difficult for you to ask, I can..."

“Don’t interfere with my life!” Hazuki shouted in fury.

Hana was shocked, and she froze with her mouth half-open.

“My studies and extracurriculars are all indispensable. Everyone’s expecting great things from me,” Hazuki said. “I wouldn’t expect someone worthless like you to understand, Hana, but someday, I’m going to have an important position in the clan. I’m different from a washout like you!”

“Hazuki...”

“Don’t you dare say anything about my life from now on! You don’t understand anything about being a practitioner!” she yelled before turning on her heel and walking away.

Hana couldn’t say anything back. She was rooted to the spot, dazed.

She was astonished to find that Hazuki thought so little of her.

Well, considering the way they’d been compared all their lives and how much Hazuki had been pampered, it might have only been natural that she thought of herself as superior whether she realized it or not.

Hana was finally able to analyze their interactions calmly.

Thanks to Sae, Hana had finally freed herself from the fetters of their parents’ expectations, but Hazuki was still shackled tight. Hana knew now that Hazuki wouldn’t be able to escape so easily.

It was as if Hazuki had been brainwashed. Their expectations had a firm hold on her. She could not get free.

What a miserable situation she was in.

And yet, even if Hana were to say something, Hazuki would never listen to the words of someone she thought of as inferior, which was clear from their conversation just now.

Hana sighed and shook her head despairingly. “Nothing will change unless Hazuki realizes the predicament she’s in herself.”

She knew Hazuki couldn’t help herself, but at the same time, she burned with anger at the way Hazuki had spoken to her.

Hana chose to just watch and wait.



Over the years, she let go of the things that didn’t serve her and made room for good to enter her life. At some point, she had started to think of her family as complete strangers.

Furthermore, the status quo in her family was unlikely to shift in the future. Her family would continue to ignore her—and she’d ignore them—until she became an adult.

Time passed, and unbeknownst to everyone else, the apathetic home environment gradually warped Hana’s personality.

But Hana had a cute ally by her side. She had Azuha, and as long as she did, she would be fine.

That was until her fifteenth birthday—the day of the incident.

While Hana was in the middle of eating her cake, a wave of discomfort flooded her body. It was so intense that she couldn't stifle her reaction to it.

The sensation that assaulted her felt like the shedding of an old skin to reveal something new...

Or like something hidden inside her all this time had finally burst out through its shell.

Immediately after, power the likes of which Hana had never felt before welled up inside her.

"...Agh." She pressed a hand to her chest, trying to soothe the discomfort and suppress the feeling.

"What's wrong?" Hazuki, who was sitting next to her, asked.

As expected of her other half, Hazuki had noticed before anyone else...No, she was the only one who had noticed Hana's turmoil.

"I-it's nothing..." Hana lied.

"You look pale."

"Really?"

Hana did her best to appear calm, but on the inside, she was rattled. The small part of her that maintained composure warned her to leave the party.

Hana carefully stood to avoid drawing the attention of others.

"Hana?" Hazuki was looking over at her with concern.

Hana experienced a strange, indescribable feeling hearing that her sister was still capable of concern for her, but it was fleeting. She was preoccupied with her own problems. She had no time to pay attention to Hazuki.

"I don't feel well, so I'm going to retire to my room," Hana told her sister.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine after I get some rest," she said and left the room.

The guests would be satisfied as long as Hazuki was there. No one would care if Hana disappeared.

Away from the public eye, Hana rushed to her bedroom, which had been relocated outside the main building of the family estate at some point over the years. The detached house she'd been given was more than spacious enough for one person.

Sae and the others dropped by frequently. Azuha had been by her side ever since she was ten. Rather than feeling lonely due to separation from her family, she welcomed the distance. Thanks to the move, she was subjected to her parents' censure less often.

Hana had requested the move herself. Thankfully, since the room

hadn't been in use, she had quickly gotten approval.

Perhaps her parents had agreed so easily because they saw her as an eyesore, but whatever the reason, Hana was happy to have secured a private sanctuary away from any nuisances.

Her room was a safe haven, and so she ensconced herself there. She made a beeline for the bed and collapsed immediately.

Azuha danced around her, worried, but since the shikigami was only a butterfly, there was nothing it could do to help.

Hana curled up, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Ugh..." she groaned.

She was hot. Deep in her chest, a fire burned. The heat assailed her body, bashing away at her like it was looking for a way out.

The fever tortured her the entire night, but when dawn broke the next morning...

Her fever had disappeared as if it had all been a dream. As a matter of fact, her body felt lighter than it had ever felt before.

She noticed one other thing.

Residing within her was a deep, vast, and rich well of power. She didn't need anyone to tell her what this power was. She understood it very well. It was as if the power itself taught her everything she needed to know.

"Azuha, come here," Hana called to her one and only shikigami.

Azuha flew to her and landed on her outstretched finger.

Hana fed Azuha a trickle of the power surging within her. She kept a tight rein over the flow, pouring it slowly into Azuha so as not to overwhelm the shikigami. The colors of Azuha's wings grew more vibrant.

When Azuha reached its limit, it flew off Hana's finger.

Hana cut off the current of power and looked at her shikigami. "Are you okay, Azuha?"

Speech should've been beyond Azuha, but Hana heard a voice, one that could only have belonged to the butterfly, say, "Yes, Master." The voice sounded like a child, high and gender-neutral, and with a bit of a lisp.

Hana had attained what she had long given up on.

Inside her lay the bountiful strength of a true practitioner. More than that, she sensed that her power surpassed Hazuki's.

Hana put her face in her hands, riding the waves of power, which were cresting within her endlessly.

What did one call the emotion washing over her? Hana didn't have a word for it.

"Are you crying, Master?" Azuha asked.

"...No. I'm not."

"Are you sad?"

“Sad...hmm? I’m happy, I think... No, maybe it is sadness. I don’t know what to call it.”

She had thought it was a lost cause, that her lack of ability as a practitioner was something she would never be able to change.

Being compared to Hazuki had made her sad. She had suffered, and at some point, without realizing it, she had given up on her own potential.

Who could have predicted that her latent power would awaken at a time like this? Hana herself still found it hard to believe.

But the flood surged on ceaselessly inside her, indifferent to her acceptance or denial.

The power she’d given up on was real, and it sat comfortably in her body as if it had been there all along.

She was overjoyed, but she couldn’t help thinking, *Why now?*

If it had only awoken earlier, she needn’t have felt such pain. Or envy. She wouldn’t have been tortured by her inferiority complex.

“Of all times, why now?” she murmured.

But the question was too little too late. Who could she take her complaints to now? She didn’t know.

“Master?” Azuha asked.

When Hana noticed how anxiously Azuha was watching her, she finally cracked a smile. “I’m all right, Azuha. More importantly, we can finally talk to each other!”

“Yes. I am happy.”

“I am, too.”

Butterflies were assumed to be inferior shikigami, but Azuha was now host to a strong power. Doubtless, the people around Hana would notice the change, unless she did something about it.

“Azuha, can you suppress your power?” she asked.

“I will try.”

Hana watched Azuha. After a few moments, the brilliant luster of the shikigami wings dimmed until she looked the same as she usually did. The power pouring from her had also ebbed.

“How is this, Master?”

“You did great. From now on, hide your power unless it’s absolutely necessary to use it,” Hana instructed.

“Won’t you tell anyone? You’ve finally unlocked all of this power.”

“I won’t. This is our little secret, Azuha.”

Azuha seemed to find it strange that Hana would try to hide her own strength, but the shikigami didn’t give the matter any more thought. If that was what her master wanted, that was what she would do. “All right,” Azuha agreed.

Hana hadn’t made the decision lightly.

Her parents would no doubt be ecstatic to learn she had obtained a

power greater than even Hazuki's and would finally praise her. All the people who had denigrated her as Hazuki's scraps would look at her with new eyes.

But what was the point?

Their newfound interest in Hana would do nothing to undo their actions toward her up until now. She would never forget their contempt, disappointment, and jeering, nor would she forget that she had been abandoned. She had no desire to see their attitudes do a one-eighty simply because she had attained power.

Besides...Hana thought about what Hazuki went through.

Hazuki, who bore the weight of everyone's expectations on her shoulders.

Whose schedule left her no time to breathe.

Who was under such immense pressure.

Who constantly wore the mask of an honor student and went along with what others wanted for her.

Hana, on the other hand, held a deep mistrust of their parents and relatives and refused to play their game. The days when she had yearned to be accepted had long since passed.

That was why she would remain as she was.

She would live as if she were no better than Hazuki's scraps.

As if I'd follow the path my parents would want me to! she rebelled internally.

Her upbringing had warped her personality a bit. She swore that she would conceal her powers.

"Their meaningless expectations belong in the trash. I don't need them," Hana said out loud. "My goal isn't to be a top student like Hazuki. I want to live freely, without being jerked around by anyone else's opinions. I'll protect my right to be myself and live the way I want to, no matter what!"

To that end, it was definitely better to keep her powers a secret.

The last thing she wanted was for those around her to change their attitudes and cling to her instead. She had less than an ounce, no, less than a fingertip's worth of trust for her parents and family. Keeping quiet was no doubt her best option.

"Until the day I finally leave this house, I'll behave as I always have," Hana resolved.

She felt guilty hiding her secret from Sae and the others who had always looked after her, but she knew she had to if she wanted to continue her quiet life.

Until the day she was freed from this household.

Someday.

Chapter 2

A few years had passed after Hana's latent powers awakened.

In the blink of an eye, she was already eighteen and a third-year high school student.

She had hidden her powers thoroughly since her fifteenth birthday. Not even Hazuki, her twin, had noticed something had changed.

Well, given how infrequently the two saw each other, perhaps that was only natural.

The true testimony to Hana's diligence was that Sae and the other servants had never suspected anything, either, even though they often dropped by to visit her when they were free.

The servants employed by the Ichise family all possessed some ability as practitioners, even if it was only the bare minimum.

People with such limited powers that they couldn't use them generally worked in the households of the practitioners as support. Since the existence of the pillars was highly classified information, the clans couldn't employ ordinary people. As a result, even the servants had the skills to sense the energy practitioners wielded to create barriers.

Even so, Hana had successfully kept her secret from Sae and the other servants up until now.

In particular, Hana felt guilty for hiding her powers from Sae. Every time she saw her parents, infrequent though the meetings were, they criticized her. Sae watched those exchanges with an expression of anger tempered by sadness. It pained Hana to see Sae hurt for her sake, but nevertheless, she couldn't tell Sae the truth. There was no telling where such a secret might leak from.

Plus, even if she hadn't gained her powers, she had long stopped caring about what her parents said to her.

Thanks to Sae, she had burned that bridge long ago.

The thorny words her parents threw on every occasion were met by a wall of utter indifference.

However, she made sure to pretend she was attentively listening to her parents' lectures. Her parents would say what they had to say and leave satisfied.

These last few years, she had become quite the actress if she did say so herself.

Maybe in the future, she would go into acting as a career. At least, that was her inside joke with Azuha. For the time being, it was their little secret.

Hana attended a specialty school called Obsidian High, which was dedicated to nurturing the next generation of practitioners.

She would have been perfectly happy to go to a normal high school, but since everyone in the Ichise family had gone to Obsidian High, she had been more or less forced to enroll.

As far as everyone around her was concerned, she couldn't hold a candle to Hazuki, but she still had enough talent to summon a shikigami. Therefore, it was unthinkable that she would choose any other path.

Obsidian High ranked its students by their strength and talent level as practitioners, and classes were divided on rank as well. Class A was the cream of the crop. Class B had all the average students. Class C was the weakest of the cohort.

Since Hana had been playing the role of the failure all this time, she had been in Class C since she was a first-year. The class sorting had taken place during the opening ceremony.

Among the crestfallen students who had been shafted into Class C, Hana alone had celebrated her placement, mentally striking a victory pose. If there hadn't been an audience, Hana would have roared in triumph.

Once her parents saw her class assignment, they left the ceremony immediately. They had already lost all hope in her. Their expectations for her were miniscule.

Admittedly, they *had* come to verify the results in person, so they might have still had a sliver of faith in her. Sure, Hana was weak compared to Hazuki, but there was a chance that she was relatively strong when pitted against the rest of their peers.

But when they found out that Hana didn't measure up against the rest of her class, not just Hazuki, the last glimmer of hope they had been holding on to fizzled and was extinguished.

Hana was pleased her parents had renounced her.

She had fastidiously hidden her power during the exam for the express purpose of avoiding her parents' interest, so her class

assignment had gone according to plan.

It would have made her sick to see her parents change their attitudes after all this time and start fawning over her.

Hana didn't even need them to treat her and Hazuki as equals. Had they shown her the slightest hint of affection or attention, Hana would have happily told them right away about her awakened powers and worked hard for her family's sake.

As it was, Hana felt more warmth for strangers than for her own parents.

Her parents hadn't yet noticed the fat fish they had let slip through their fingers out of their own arrogance.

Hana hoped they would never notice. Her life as a bottom-of-the-barrel student was extremely carefree, though there was one exception.

Even as first-years, Class A students had to take practicals: hands-on classes that took place on location and involved sealing or destroying shades that were targeting the pillars. Of course, they started out as backup for the professionals, but by their second and third years, the practicals became more and more like actual battles. Even the third-year students in Class B had to participate in the practicals.

However, no one in Class C, Hana's class, had enough power to be useful in battle, so they were able to focus on their studies from the safety of the classroom.

They were able to stay far away from danger, and even when they were sent to the field, they only ever supported the battle from the rear.

Rear support was an important role in its own right.

Those who could fight would fight. Those who couldn't supported the vanguard from behind the lines and handled cleanup after.

The role wasn't anything to sneeze at, but in the school environment, where everyone was strictly divided into ranks, Class A's and Class B's contempt for Class C was a foregone conclusion.

The other students were particularly derisive toward Hana, since she had such a distinguished student as her sister. On her way to school, she always heard whispers and snickering behind her back. She'd grown used to it, but it was still aggravating.

Were it not for that one annoyance, she could have enjoyed her school life to its fullest.

In any case, the price for hiding her powers was bearing everyone's disdain, and she paid it of her own free will, so she had no reason to complain.

On one particular school day, she was in the classroom with her friend, Suzu Mitsui, when Suzu suddenly said, "Look, it's your sister, Hana!"

Suzu had light brown hair cut in a bob. She was a gentle girl who radiated warmth and goodness. She didn't treat Hana as Hazuki's younger sister but saw her for who she was. She was Hana's cherished friend.

Riding on Suzu's shoulder was her shikigami, which took the form of a squirrel. It was one of the weaker types of shikigami, but it was a perfect match for Suzu, who was as adorable as a small woodland critter.

When people met Hana, they were usually fascinated by her at first, since she had the same face as Hazuki. They would look at her as if she were a rare creature. However, inevitably, they would compare her to Hazuki and find her lacking. Then their interest would turn into pity or condemnation.

But not Suzu. She had always been straightforward.

Hana was Hazuki's younger twin? So what? That was Suzu's stance.

Hana thought it had been worth enrolling in Obsidian High if only for the fact that she had been able to meet Suzu.

Hana looked out the window, down at Hazuki, who was surrounded by a ring of her classmates.

"Your sister's popular as always, isn't she?" Suzu murmured with admiration.

Hazuki was smiling at her audience. Her bright and dazzling smile drew people in. However, Hana knew very well that Hazuki was merely putting on an act, and she had mixed feelings watching her sister.

"That she is..." Hana responded.

In the past, Hana had tried to tactfully give Hazuki her sincere advice and opinion.

Was it truly all right by Hazuki to keep following their parents' wishes? Hana had asked.

But Hazuki had rebuffed her and chosen to stay in her role as the golden child. Even now, she was still playing the part of the honor student everyone wanted her to be.

No matter what fate befell Hana, there was no way she would ever become a star student like Hazuki.

That was why, watching Hazuki's display of charm, Hana had only one thought. "All in a day's work," she mumbled.

Hana had genuinely tried to help Hazuki, but she had to admit that she owed her current freedom from her parents' watchful eyes to Hazuki's efforts. It was a blessing to Hana that her parents focused all their attention on Hazuki, and it assisted her in her mission to keep her powers a secret.

"By the way, Hana, what did you write down as your future aspirations on the survey?" Suzu asked Hana suddenly, dropping the

subject of Hazuki entirely.

“What did you put down, Suzu?” Hana asked back.

“Ah-ha-ha, well, you see, I want to join the ranks of practitioners in the rearguard,” she answered.

Nearly half the graduates of Obsidian High who were from practitioner families joined the Association of Practitioners to work in the field. The Association had been set up by the five clans who oversaw the protection of the pillars.

However, the members were not all equals. Just like Obsidian High, the Association split its members into ranks based on their skill level. A practitioner’s responsibilities differed depending on their rank.

The upper ranks formed the heart of the offense against shades. Theirs was a dangerous job, but it paid well.

The rearguard that Suzu was aiming for was primarily responsible for support and cleanup. The work was relatively safe.

Suzu was in Class C just like Hana. She knew full well that fighting on the front lines was beyond her capabilities.

There was little doubt that she would be able to join the guard, for she, too, belonged to one of the five great clans. Her last name contained the kanji character for “three,” and her family was a branch of the Sankourou clan.

In fact, the rearguard would likely welcome her with open arms. The vanguard were the heroes of the battle and always the center of attention. The rearguard was comparatively low profile and was always short of people.

“What about you, Hana?” Suzu asked.

“I want to work at a subsidiary of the Ichinomiya group and live a life that has nothing to do with practitioners,” Hana declared.

The Ichichomiyas and the other four clans protected Japan from the shadows, but they also held a lot of influence in the public sphere, to the point that they used to be called the five financial titans. Although their heyday had passed, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that they still had a firm grip on the reins of the economy.

It was said that the will of the former titans was reflected in politics as well, not that a lowly being like Hana knew much about that.

As the daughter of a branch of one of the five clans, Hana’s number one desire was to join a company under the Ichinomiya clan’s umbrella. She had no intention whatsoever of becoming a practitioner.

Not everyone who was born into a practitioner household chose that life. There were people like Sae who chose to work closely with practitioners even if she wasn’t one herself, and there were people, more than a few, who chose to live as one of the commonfolk, too.

People chose different career paths for various reasons. Some simply weren’t powerful enough. Some had retired from being practitioners.

All the clans, including the Ichinomiya clan, employed those kinds of people in their subsidiaries.

Hana was part of the Ichinomiya clan, so naturally, she would be looking to work for a company held by the clan. Barring any unusual circumstances, she should be able to find a position.

She would land a job and finally leave that house behind.

Her parents might object to her plans. They could be furious and attempt to stop her. It was shameful for someone born into a practitioner household to choose a different career.

However, just like her parents had given up on Hana, Hana had also given up on her parents.

Her future was hers alone to decide.

If she had to cut off ties with her parents to pursue the life she wanted, she wouldn't hesitate for even a second.

But Hazuki was different. She would surely walk the path of a practitioner. Even among the elite students in Class A, her grades were far better than her classmates'.

If she didn't choose the job herself, the Association would no doubt headhunt her anyway.

Hana knew that her sister would readily embrace the fate that was waiting for her. She would continue down the path their parents and everyone else wanted her to walk without any doubts in her head or unease in her heart.

As her other half, Hana wanted to ask if Hazuki was truly all right with such a future, but Hazuki surely wouldn't listen to what Hana had to say. They could no longer return to the days when they had been partners in crime.

A small part of Hana mourned the loss of their close friendship. She yearned for the time when the two of them would confide in each other about their worries.



After class, Hana was browsing books in the school library when she heard whispering nearby.

"Look, isn't that Hazuki's good-for-nothing sister over there?" one person said with a snicker.

"What's she doing in the library?" a second person sneered.

"Studying isn't going to do her any good. She's never going to be more than a waste of space no matter what she does."

The derisive laughter was perfectly audible from where Hana was standing.

The insults washed over her like water. They had nothing to do with

her. She continued to scan the books on the shelf, but suddenly she felt a cold wave of killing intent.

That's not good, she thought and promptly moved somewhere with fewer people.

As soon as she was alone, an elegant young woman and a muscular young man materialized in front of her.

But Hana showed no surprise at their sudden appearance. If anything, she looked vexed.

Both the newcomers looked to be around twenty, and both were in a foul mood.

"Aoi, Miyabi, didn't I tell you before not to manifest while I'm in school?" Hana scolded. "This is hardly the first time I've been insulted. You don't have to react to every little thing."

"I apologize," the woman said immediately, contrite and modest. Her name was Miyabi. Her long hair was pulled into an updo, and she wore delicate, flowing clothing that made her look like a celestial maiden. Her raiment enhanced her near-divine, ephemeral beauty.

The man standing beside Miyabi was Aoi. He was tall with a solid build. Strapped on his back was a great sword that was nearly his height. His beauty rivaled Miyabi's, but on the inside, he was a rascal with an iron will.

These two were shikigami whom Hana had conjured after her powers had awakened.

They always stayed at Hana's side, but they normally suppressed their powers and hid their presences as much as possible. However, earlier in the library, they had lost control after hearing those students bad-mouth her. Hana had sensed their displeasure and fled from the library.

Aoi was dissatisfied with Hana's passivity and looked sullen.

"Aoi?" Hana prompted.

"...I understand where you're coming from, Master, but I couldn't stay silent and watch you be insulted."

Where did he inherit his stubborn streak from? she wondered.

Aoi and Miyabi always had Hana's best interests at heart. They were like the currently absent Azuha in that regard. Since they were her shikigami, it might've gone without saying, but they were her unwavering allies, and she drew great courage from their presence.

"It's nothing new, right?" Hana said.

She was able to ignore all the insults precisely because her shikigami were by her side. However, she didn't know how to express her gratitude.

"I still don't like it," Aoi said.

Next to him, Miyabi, who had been docile up until now, nodded.

Hana sighed with exasperation. She was glad that her happiness was

their priority, but she found their stubbornness difficult to deal with.

"I have no intention of revealing your existences. If you two can't suppress your powers properly, I'll have to leave you at home with Azuha."

The two were conflicted by her ultimatum. Hana could see that clearly. However, since the three of them were together all the time, she knew her shikigami well, and she knew the two of them would fold in the end.

"Ugh, fine...", Aoi conceded, his dissatisfaction painted across his face.

Hana reached for his head, and Aoi crouched down. He knew he was too tall for her. He could be cute at times, too.

She patted his head consolingly.

Hana thought that was the end of the conversation, but then Miyabi spoke up. "What if I let out my power just a little bit? I'll make sure no one notices," she pleaded, looking at Hana with puppy dog eyes.

Hana might have been the same gender as Miyabi, but she found her heart swayed by Miyabi's beauty just the same.

Nevertheless, she wasn't going to give in. The shikigami pair released a significant amount of power just by manifesting.

At the moment, she had erected a barrier to mask the shikigami's presence, but if the two were to use their powers, the barrier might no longer be enough.

Among the numerous practitioners in the school, there were more than a few with sharp instincts. If her secret were discovered now, it would cause a big commotion.

The only known human shikigami, the rarest and most invaluable of all the forms, in Obsidian High was Hazuki's. The moment word got out that Hana was served by not one but two human shikigami, she would no doubt be fast-tracked to a future as a practitioner.

That was a fate Hana wanted to avoid at all costs, which was why she had no choice but to be strict with Aoi and Miyabi.

"No, you can't!" Hana said in response to Miyabi's plea.

Miyabi laid a palm against her cheek with a deeply disappointed expression. "Are you sure? I should think that it's possible..."

"I think so, too," Aoi interjected.

"I said no!" Hana insisted.

"That's too bad. How dare those cowards look down on my lady. I wanted to make them suffer...", Miyabi said.

"I could crush them in the blink of an eye if you said the word...", Aoi added.

The two grumbled their complaints as they faded out of sight again.

"What am I going to do with them...?" Hana said with a wry smile, but secretly, she was slightly pleased by their reactions.



One day, Hana had returned home from school and was watching TV in her room, popping rice crackers into her mouth with one hand.

The newscast featured a distressing story that had Hana grimacing.

“Apparently, a bunch of dogs have been found dead. I heard something similar just the other day about a dog killed the same way,” Hana said to her shikigami. “Who would want to harm such cute animals? Some people are so heartless. Scum like that should just go to hell.”

“That’s true. The scene of the crime isn’t far from here, either,” Miyabi said, her face grim. She had been listening to the news as she brewed tea for Hana. She placed a cup of the hot tea in front of Hana. “You should be careful, too, Master.”

There were countless examples of spirits with deep grudges turning into shades.

This incident had happened nearby. It was possible that a shade with a deep resentment toward humans could form at the crime scene.

Aoi was concerned that Hana could run into the shade, but she thought his worry was unnecessary.

“Oh please. Why should I be careful when you’re with me every second of the day, Aoi? If I saw it, you’d deal with it before it got a chance to attack, right?”

“Of course!” Aoi replied instantly with a stubborn jut of his jaw, as if daring Hana to find a problem with that.

“That’s all well and good, but make sure you don’t do anything where people can see you,” Hana cautioned.

“I know,” he said.

“Are you sure about that...?” She was dubious.

She had run into a shade recently on the way home from school. Aoi had killed it in the blink of an eye before she could stop him.

The pillar that the Ichinomiya clan swore to protect was somewhere near where Hana lived. All sorts of shades aiming for the pillar flocked here, so the chances of encountering a shade were high.

Shades were fundamentally invisible, and they didn’t attack normal humans who were unaware of their existence. Shades grew stronger by absorbing the power of practitioners.

Kids who were talented enough to produce shikigami usually enrolled in schools dedicated to raising practitioners, like Obsidian High, where they also learned how to destroy shades. However, quite frankly, few practitioners were strong enough to attract the attention of a shade, since the shades knew the best source of power was the pillars themselves.

But Hana was an exception. Even though she actively suppressed

her power, shades could still sense it, and they often came for her when she was alone.

Thanks to that, even though she wasn't in Class A, she had accumulated a wealth of practical battle experience.

She had originally created Aoi and Miyabi because she had been fed up with having to deal with the shades herself.

The two of them acted according to Hana's wishes. In fact, they were so exemplary that lately she had begun to worry that her own skills were going to rust if she didn't occasionally get the chance to use them.

But so what? A practitioner's skill set was useless to Hana, who had resolved to leave that life behind her and live as a normal human being instead.

Hana continued watching TV since it was already on, but out of the blue, she sensed a human presence coming her way. Aoi and Miyabi blinked out of view.

The only people who came to Hana's detached residence were Sae and the other servants. Hana was close to them, but she still had no intention of revealing Aoi's and Miyabi's existences to anyone. Therefore, the two shikigami were under orders to disappear the moment they sensed someone coming.

Just as Hana expected, her visitor was none other than Sae.

Hana glanced at the clock and realized that it was almost time for supper, so she found it strange that Sae had come empty-handed, looking troubled.

"Miss Hana, you've been summoned to the main residence for supper," Sae said.

"Huh? Are you sure?" Hana asked.

"Yes. You will dine with the master."

For a split second, Hana thought that she had misheard. This was the first time something like this had happened since she had moved into the detached residence.

"My father called for me?"

"Yes. He must have something of import to speak with you about."

What strange turn of events was this? What could have happened to make her father call for her?

Hana went to the main residence, praying to herself that it wouldn't turn into anything troublesome. She arrived to find that, for once, even her brother, Yanagi, had come home. After he had graduated Obsidian High and become a practitioner, he had been swamped with work. Hana didn't know the details—the two of them didn't talk.

When was the last time they'd had a conversation? It had been so long that Hana didn't remember.

Her brother was uncommunicative as always. His eyes had flickered toward her when she entered, but otherwise he hadn't looked her way once. Hana ignored his attitude toward her and took a seat.

Next, Hazuki came into the room. When she saw Yanagi, she did a double take, just as surprised as Hana had been.

It had been a long time since Hana had been with Hazuki in the same space and sitting so close.

No one spoke. An awkward tension and silence hung heavy among the three of them, until their parents arrived. Their mother and father seated themselves at the table.

The servants began to carry in the dishes.

How many years had it been since they had gathered as a family around the dining table?

Not a single one of them looked like they were enjoying the reunion.

As she ate, Hana shot glances at their father, wondering when he was going to come out and explain why he had called them here, but he didn't speak until everyone had finished their meals.

He announced, "Yanagi likely already knows, but for everyone else, a new lord will soon succeed the Ichinomiya clan."

Hana was usually completely indifferent to news about the family and clan, but even she was surprised. Hazuki, sitting next to Hana, wore the same shocked expression, so it must have been the first she'd heard of it, too.

Their father continued, "The next lord will be the oldest son of the main family, Lord Saku Ichinomiya. The family will be holding a ceremony to formally announce his succession. You will all be attending."

Hazuki and Yanagi nodded promptly, accepting their father's order without a second thought.

Hana was alone in her objections. "Does that include me, Father?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied curtly.

"Hazuki is one thing, but I should think that my presence would be unnecessary," she said, implying that there was no reason for a so-called good-for-nothing like her to be involved.

"No, you will go. Every daughter of marriageable age from the branch families has been summoned."

"Why?"

"Lord Ichinomiya is yet to marry, and he is not promised to anyone. The ceremony will double as a search for his bridal candidate," their father declared.

How annoying! Hana internally raged. She regretted coming to dinner.

“That said, unlike Hazuki, there is not even a one-in-a-billion chance that Lord Ichinomiya will give you the time of day. Nevertheless, you *will* attend the ceremony. You are a daughter of the Ichise family, tenuous though it may be.”

Hana was only treated as a daughter when it was convenient.

She could sense their father’s reluctance, but he could not have hated the situation more than she did. The flame of resistance flared up inside her heart.

What if you played hooky? the devil on her shoulder whispered in her ear. However, skipping the ceremony would only bring more trouble down on her head later on, so she gave up on the idea.

The day of the succession ceremony arrived.

Sae helped dress her in a light pink *furisode*, a formal kimono with long sleeves. Sae also pinned her hair up in a pretty updo and adorned it with accessories.

For once, Hana thought she looked quite cute. She was feeling good about herself as she joined the others in the main house.

Hazuki was already waiting dressed in a kimono of rich crimson, her hair adorned with opulent accessories.

The two identical twins looked at each other, both at a loss for words.

The kimonos and hair pieces had all been furnished by their parents.

Since they were going to be visiting the residence of the main family, Hana’s kimono was appropriately splendid, but compared to Hazuki’s, it looked threadbare.

Hana’s kimono wasn’t shabby—far from it—but the one Hazuki was wearing was a gorgeous piece of superior quality.

This was far from the first time their parents had shown Hazuki favor, but never before had their bias been so visibly and glaringly obvious.

“Are you ready?” their father asked, looking at Hazuki with approval. In contrast, he acted as if Hana wasn’t even there.

Their mother came up behind him and praised Hazuki effusively. “You look stunning, Hazuki. I just knew that kimono would suit you perfectly!”

“Thank you. But it is certainly...different from Hana’s kimono,” Hazuki said, searching for some sort of explanation from their parents, all while darting glances at Hana.

Hana wasn’t the only one who had noticed the glaring discrepancy, it seemed.

Hazuki looked bewildered, which was a good sign in Hana’s opinion. She was relieved that Hazuki didn’t feel a sense of entitlement toward Hana, that her sister’s personality hadn’t yet

twisted to that extent.

Their parents, on the other hand, brushed off Hazuki's confusion.

"I told you a few days ago, didn't I? The next head will be selecting his bride today. You are an exceptionally talented practitioner, Hazuki, and a beautiful young woman if I do say so myself. Lord Ichinomiya will no doubt be drawn in by your charm as well. That is why we've prepared this outfit for you," their father said.

"You will definitely be chosen. I'm sure of it. Fight. Don't lose to the daughters of the other families," their mother added.

"...I understand," Hazuki replied obediently.

Watching the exchange from outside the bubble, Hana was filled with unease.

It went without saying that the next head of the family wouldn't waste his time with a waste of space like Hana, and that was just fine by her.

What worried her was the immense pressure their parents were putting on Hazuki. They were asking for too much, and they didn't realize it at all.

Hana would've brushed off their demands without a second thought, but Hazuki was still trying to live up to their parents' expectations and had nodded her agreement.

Hana watched the three of them with a frosty gaze, not that any of them noticed. *What a farce*, she thought to herself.

Yanagi, wearing a navy kimono, came to fetch them. "Father, Mother, it is time for us to be off."

"Ah, you're right," their father said. "Let us go, then."

"Hazuki, you must do everything you can to catch Master Saku's eye. If you earn his favor, you will hold the power and privilege of the Ichinomiya clan, and as the lady of the house, you would be second only to the lord."

"Yes, Mother," Hazuki said with a determined nod.

Their parents seemed satisfied by Hazuki's show of resolve and led them out of the house.

Since their parents saved their expectations for Hazuki alone, Hana was well aware that she was unneeded. She was seriously considering making an escape, when something touched her hair.

She started to turn on instinct but froze when Hazuki said sharply, "Stay still!"

She thought Hazuki was going to fix her hair for her, but her sister soon stepped away.

"Can I move now?" Hana asked.

"Yes," Hazuki said.

Hana turned around slowly and locked eyes with Hazuki, who was wearing a vaguely dissatisfied expression.

“What were you doing?” Hana asked.

“Nothing,” Hazuki replied and moved ahead of Hana.

Hana was going to interrogate Hazuki further, but Azuha flew next to her and said, “There are more pretty flowers and clips in your hair now, Master.”

“What?”

Hana touched her hair delicately so as not to mess up her updo. As Azuha had said, her hair accessories had multiplied.

Furthermore, Hazuki was unmistakably missing a few clips.

Hana didn’t know what had brought about this whim.

Perhaps Hazuki had thought Hana’s appearance was too plain, and so she had given Hana some of her own ornaments.

Hana couldn’t quite name the emotion welling up within her.

She thought Hazuki hated her.

And why not? Hana was no more valuable than table scraps—a pest. She had been positive that she was just a source of Hazuki’s displeasure.

Wasn’t that why the two of them had stopped talking...?

Could it be that she had been wrong this whole time?

She didn’t understand Hazuki’s feelings.

Without a word of gratitude to Hazuki, Hana followed her family to the Ichinomiya residence, her heart heavy.

It was Hana’s first time stepping foot on the grounds of the Ichinomiya residence, which was a sprawling and resplendent traditional Japanese estate.

Since Hana’s family was a branch of the Ichinomiya clan, their house also tended to evoke adjectives like *grandiose* and *lavish* with its spacious garden and grandeur. However, it was incomparable to the Ichinomiya residence.

Their car pulled through the front gates of the property, but the grounds were so large that they continued for quite a while before reaching the entrance. The residence certainly befitted one of the five former financial titans. The main family lived on an entirely different level than the rest of them.

At last, the Ichises pulled up in front of the main entrance, where cars of other branch families and related personnel were already parked. Hana and her family disembarked, and their driver pulled their car into a free space.

Hana was dumbfounded by the sheer opulence of the residence.

“You must be from the Ichise family. Welcome,” a person who was most likely a servant greeted them. “Please follow me.”

As they were led through the halls, Hana gawked at the interior, fascinated.

Hazuki nudged Hana with her elbow. "Stop gaping. It's embarrassing," she rebuked, wrinkling her brow. Hana probably looked like a country bumpkin with the way she was gaping.

But Hana was far from contrite. In fact, she doubled down. "Come on. Don't you think this is amazing? This is the first time I've been in such a luxurious estate."

"Yes, well...", Hazuki said hesitantly.

"This could be the last time we set foot in here. I have to get my fill while I have the chance," Hana said.

"That's true," Hazuki admitted despite herself, but she immediately regained her senses. "Wait, no. No, you can't. As a member of the Ichise family, you must project composure."

"You are free to play the part of the proper lady, Hazuki. *I* will be enjoying myself," Hana said. "Anyway, Mother and Father aside, Yanagi's rather calm, isn't he?"

"Of course he is. He comes here often for practitioner business," Hazuki explained.

"Really?"

"Yes. You didn't know that? Didn't you ever stop to wonder where he is and what he's doing all the time?"

"Not at all," Hana replied. Sae would have told her, but Hana wasn't the least bit interested, so she'd never asked.

Hazuki's expression soured. "Why not? You should've known! Aren't you his little sister?!"

"But we never talk. Never. And it's not just me and him. You..."

That was right. The last time she and Hazuki had talked like this was several years ago.

Despite the long gap in their history, they had been able to jump right back into conversation without a hint of awkwardness. That was proof of the special connection between twins.

Hana hadn't finished her sentence, but Hazuki must have known anyway. Hazuki looked uncomfortable all of a sudden, but to hide her uneasiness, she blurted out, "Yanagi is the youngest practitioner ever to have earned the Lapis rank. I heard he'll be promoted to Obsidian soon. That will make him a Fifth Color practitioner."

Practitioners enlisted in the Association were divided into five ranks, with First Color as the most junior and Fifth Color as the most senior. Each rank was assigned a different color: White, Gold, Red, Lapis, or Obsidian. The Association distributed pendants as licenses. The color of the pendant corresponded to a practitioner's rank.

Hana had known that Yanagi had started working as a practitioner, but because they met so rarely, she had never seen his pendant and had no idea what his current rank was.

"Neat," Hana responded indifferently.

Even with Hazuki's explanation, she could only muster up a perfunctory interest. It was an impressive feat, to be sure, but that was all it was.

To Hana, it had nothing to do with her.

She could count on one hand the number of times she had seen her older brother in the last year. Was it any wonder she was indifferent?

However, Hazuki was unable to ignore Hana's aloof reaction. She looked up sharply and said, "What's with that cold response?! It's an amazing achievement!"

"I never said it wasn't...", Hana said.

"You're always like this, Hana. Always so apathetic! You act like nothing's ever your business!"

Considering how little Hana had to do with her family, *apathetic* was a fitting description for her attitude.

But Hana's icy relationship with her family wasn't one of her own making. Her family had lost interest in her first.

Hana had only gone along with the flow. Why should she have to listen to Hazuki's accusations?

She had just opened her mouth to fire off a retort when their father interjected. "What is with all the commotion? We are guests in the Ichinomiya residence. Behave."

Hazuki shot Hana a poisonous glare before hurrying after their father.

Hana followed behind them. After that, the two twins didn't get another chance to talk.

They were led to the main hall, where a crowd of guests were already seated.

Here and there around the room were young women around Hana's age. Their fighting spirits and steely resolve were obvious at a glance. Most likely, they had their eyes set on becoming the lady of the house.

All the women were arrayed with luxurious outfits and accessories. Ironically, Hana stood out more with her comparatively modest kimono.

Among those allocated to the branch families, the Ichise family was seated in the second-rate seats along the fringes of the room. Their seats reflected their lower social standing and influence within the Ichinomiya clan. Several generations ago, they used to be seated near the head of the clan, but since there hadn't been many strong practitioners born to the family in recent history, their position had gradually slipped.

That was all the more reason why the Ichises had hung all their hopes and expectations on Hazuki, whose power and talent rivaled practitioners from the main family. Their parents intended to use

Hazuki to claw their way back to the top.

Hana couldn't have cared less about their family's standing in the clan. She thought their father should discard his useless pride.

However, their father clung stubbornly to the idea of having authority far beyond his station, despite being an unremarkable practitioner himself. His ambition was nothing more than a nuisance for the children wrapped up in his selfish whims.

Hana had hidden her ability so thoroughly to avoid being used as a pawn in his futile quest for power.

The empty seats around the room continued to fill up.

After a short while, a woman around the same age as Hana's mother came into the room, followed by a young man around Hana and Hazuki's age. The buzz of conversation died down instantly to complete silence when they entered.

Then the new lord of the clan made his appearance at long last.

A servant announced his entrance. "The lord of the Ichinomiya clan, Lord Saku Ichinomiya." The sliding doors opened, and a lone man walked in.

The guests seated around the room bowed their heads simultaneously. Hana followed suit as well.

"Everyone, raise your heads," he said in a low voice. He spoke softly but firmly.

Hana kept an eye on those around her as she sat back up. Since she and her family were seated so far from the center of the action, she couldn't make out what the head of the family looked like, but his voice sounded considerably younger than she had imagined.

She had assumed any candidate in line to succeed the clan would have been fairly senior. However, now that she thought about it, the potential brides gathered here were all young women, so he must have been close to her in age.

"I am Saku Ichinomiya. I will be succeeding the head of the Ichinomiya clan. Henceforth, I will be taking on the mantle of the Master of the Barrier, and I pledge to continue protecting the pillar."

"We pledge our support," someone in the crowd shouted.

The guests around the hall once again lowered their heads as one.

Master of the Barrier was a title that could only be claimed by the lords of the five clans responsible for maintaining the barriers around the pillars. It was a heavy title to bear, for it came with great responsibility.

But that was a world in which Hana had no part. At least, that was what she believed at the time.



The succession ceremony, grandiose-sounding though it may have been, came with few formalities or festivities. It entailed only the lord's proclamation of his succession before the clan's families as witness and the banquet afterward.

The servants brought in the meal, and one of them set a *zen* tray in front of Hana. The tray had legs and acted as a personal serving table. It was loaded with dishes.

Hana ate her meal silently, surreptitiously glancing toward the head of the room. All the seats of the young women had been moved to the front before the banquet started regardless of their family's personal standing.

Apparently, the ceremony's double function as a search for a bride wasn't just a bad joke.

Thanks to her new seat, Hana could finally see the man named Saku Ichinomiya. The new lord of the house had black hair, a sharp nose, and clean features. His jet-black eyes were steeled with determination.

His good looks had the daughters of the branch families in a tizzy.

He should have been able to find a partner easily without resorting to a group matchmaking session. Hana secretly suspected he was still single because his standards were absurdly high or because there was something wrong with him.

One of the young ladies gathered up her courage and approached to pour him a drink. The rest of the women quickly flocked around him so as not to be outdone.

"Lord Ichinomiya, do you enjoy music? I am fond of the koto myself," one of the women said.

"I have a penchant for dancing. It would be my honor if you attended a performance," another one appealed.

The women could not have been more blatant in their advances.

They were like a pack of carnivores in front of a raw steak.

Hana searched for Hazuki to see if she was faring all right, only to find her at the edge of the circle. She had moved too slowly and was now at a loss for what to do. Her irritation showed on her face.

The lord had borne even the most brazen of the women's overtures in silence, but he finally opened his mouth to speak. "I have heard that one of you possesses a human shikigami. Step forward."

The young women looked around at each other in confusion, but Hazuki pushed her way to the front to kneel before the lord.

"I—I am she," Hazuki said, visibly nervous.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"I am Hazuki of the Ichise family."

Was Hazuki thinking of this as her chance to take initiative? Hana wondered.

Hazuki turned her winning, yet calculated and carefully cultivated,

smile at the head of the clan. The open congeniality of her smile dazzled most men, but the lord's face did not so much as twitch.

Inwardly, Hana felt a flash of admiration for the man. On the other hand, Hazuki must have been thrown off balance by his unexpected indifference.

It seemed that he did not care so much about Hazuki herself as about her shikigami. He said, "Summon your shikigami."

"Y-yes, my lord! Hiragi, come."

A shikigami in the form of a small boy appeared out of thin air. His appearance hadn't changed since Hazuki had first created him.

Back then, Hiragi looked to be the same age as the twins had been. Seeing him for the first time in a long while, Hana was shocked by how young he looked. Had he always been such a small child?

"This is my shikigami, Hiragi," Hazuki said.

The lord scanned Hiragi from head to toe with a narrowed gaze. When he finished, he said flatly, "I've seen enough. Dismiss him."

"What? Y-yes, of course," Hazuki replied, baffled. Unsure of what he wanted from her, she nevertheless ordered Hiragi away.

Hana watched the exchange out of the corner of her eye. Her only opinion of the lord was that he was imperious, but ultimately, he had nothing to do with her. She chose to ignore the flock of women around him and focused on her meal instead.

She was oblivious to the fact that Lord Saku Ichinomiya was watching her.



Just a few days after the succession ceremony, the shades made their move.

The lord of the clan was responsible for overseeing the barrier around the clan's pillar, so the barrier needed to be transferred between generations.

The transfer between clan lords inevitably weakened the barrier.

Which meant that all the shades took the opportunity to attack while the barrier was at its most vulnerable.

There weren't enough full-fledged practitioners to defend against the waves of shades, so classes for the students of Class A and Class B were temporarily suspended so they could assist with the defense.

The washouts of Class C assumed it was none of their concern, but they were too optimistic. In the end, even Class C was called in for duty.

That day, the shades had swarmed around an abandoned house. Hana and her classmates had been stationed on the grounds as part of

the rearguard and were waiting for their turn. Nearby, a group of practitioners belonging to the Association were making preparations to treat any wounded.

The practitioners assigned to the rearguard were all White or Gold ranks. In other words, they were the lowest ranking of all the practitioners.

“What a hassle...,” Hana grumbled. She had no motivation whatsoever to participate in the cleanup.

Suzu pouted at her. “Come on, Hana. This is a rare chance to actually get some firsthand battle experience. Focus.”

“You say that, but we’re just backup. It’s not like we’re actually going to fight. We’ve been standing around for three hours already. Can’t I go home?”

“No!” Suzu said, grabbing on to Hana’s arm in the fear that she might actually leave.

“But I’m hungry...,” she whined, which was true.

The signs of increased shade activity had been detected after noon. Class C had gathered on the grounds after class ended and had been waiting without any food ever since.

By this time, Hana would have normally long since finished her supper. Of course she was hungry.

Right on cue, Hana’s stomach growled loudly.

“Oh, I have some snacks in my bag. Wait a sec,” Suzu said.

Suzu let go of Hana’s arm and dashed toward the makeshift storehouse the Association’s practitioners had set up. Next to it was a simple tent where the students had stashed their belongings. Hana watched Suzu’s back as she ran off.

Then an unexpected shudder ran down her spine. At nearly the same time, Azuha, who was perched in her hair like a hair clip, shouted, “Master!”

Hana reflexively snapped into action. She bolted toward Suzu and tackled her from behind. The two of them fell heavily to the ground.

“Aah!” Suzu cried sharply.

She raised herself up and turned around only to see that Hana had been the one who had attacked her. Confused, she asked, “Huh? Hana? What’s wrong? What is it?”

But Hana didn’t have the time to answer Suzu’s questions.

A large pit had been gouged in the earth right where Suzu had been standing a moment before.

She looked up to see a horde of shades gathering around them.

Shades took on an infinite variety of shapes and forms, from animals and amorphous blobs to chimeras formed from the parts of different beings, among others.

The malice and malevolence pouring off shades were enough to

raise goose bumps on whoever saw them. They were only visible to practitioners. Other than those two traits, there were few shared commonalities among shades.

Such were the kinds of sinister beings that appeared before them in droves, causing a commotion among the students of Class C and the practitioners.

However, low-ranked as they may be, the Association's practitioners were professionals with actual combat experience, and they quickly snapped out of their shock.

"All hands, prepare for battle! Be ready to raise your barriers! I want contact established with the forces who are inside now!" one of them snapped out.

However, the students of Class C were in a state of confusion. They were panicking. Unlike their peers in Class A and Class B, they had little field experience. Their disorientation was inevitable, but they could not afford to be distracted. Any lapse in concentration could be fatal.

The students trying to run from the swarms were a hindrance to the practitioners in the middle of combat.

Hana, too, was a member of Class C, but she was often attacked by shades, so she was able to stay calm in the face of the sudden threat. However, next to her, Suzu clung tightly to her arm, shaking in fear.

"What is going on...?" Suzu whimpered.

Hana was confident that she could hold her own in a fight if it came down to it, since she faced shades on a regular basis. Quite frankly, the shades gathered around them were small fries. Aoi could wipe them out in an instant.

However, if she summoned Aoi and leaped into the fray, she would be revealing her true strength in front of everyone. That was the last thing she wanted, but...

The shrieks of her classmates came from all around her.

"Eeyah!"

"Get away!"

The students were running around in fright. The practitioners yelled back commands to try and establish order.

"Stay calm! Trap the shades with a barrier!"

"Stand your ground and fight!"

"I can't, I can't, I can't!" one of her classmates screamed.

Hana watched the scene play out with a pained expression. "This is utter chaos... If Class A were here, they'd be able to manage somehow."

Nevertheless, Hazuki and her classmates in Class A were nowhere to be seen. Not even the students in Class B were around.

While Hana hesitated, a shade attacked her and Suzu from

underneath.

Suzu's future ambition was to become a practitioner, but in the face of a real shade, she froze and could do nothing but scream. "Eeeek!"

Hana took in Suzu's state of fright out of the corner of her eye. She fixed her gaze on the shade before them. Then...

"Expand."

The moment the command left her lips, a barrier appeared to the sound of a clear chime, trapping the shade within it.

"Eliminate."

The shade wailed in agony and disappeared.

Hana dissolved her barrier, leaving no trace of what had happened behind.

Suzu blinked in wide-eyed shock. She had had a front-row seat to the whole thing. "That was amazing, Hana. You destroyed it!"

"It was nothing. That was one of the first things we learned in school. Dealing with a shade as weak as that one is hardly anything to brag about."

"I—I guess so..." Suzu replied. It was true that Hana had used a rudimentary technique, but Hana's words had left a bad taste in her mouth. After all, she hadn't been able to lift a finger.

Nevertheless, Hana's assessment was right. These shades were low-level. The Class C students should have been able to handle them as long as they kept their cool.

But the violence had left the students shaking.

It was chaos. At this rate, someone could be killed.

Should she help? Should she hold back? Hana was torn.

She had moderated her power when she had dealt with the shade, so no one had noticed what she had done. However, eradicating a horde of this size wouldn't be something she could talk her way out of.

Aoi and Miyabi were waiting for her to give them the okay. *When? Now?* Their impatience was transmitted clearly to Hana.

"...I guess I have no choice."

Farewell to thee, my days of peace.

She shed a tear in her heart.

Hana was just about to summon Aoi and Miyabi when someone else yelled, "Bind!"

In the next instant, all the shades on the field were trapped in a barrier.

The students running to escape and the practitioners fighting for their lives stopped in their tracks. They all turned as one to look at the young man striding through the grounds with a lady in pure white at his side.

Hana knew him.

“That’s the Ichinomiya...”

There was no way she would have forgotten his face. She had seen him at the succession ceremony just a few days prior. Lord Saku Ichinomiya.

The young woman accompanying him was most likely his shikigami. Her white hair was done up in high pigtailed. Triangular ears like a dog’s perked up out of her head, and for some unknown reason, she was wearing a flouncy maid costume.

At odds with her quirky appearance, tremendous power poured off her in waves.

Saku strode through the crowd, his every step deliberate, heavy with a dignity befitting the lord of the clan.

The students didn’t know who he was, but the practitioners all looked relieved.

“Banish,” he said, and instantly all of the shades confined in his barrier disappeared.

Interestingly, there were no set incantations for creating barriers or destroying the trapped shades. The words used varied from person to person. Every practitioner chose phrases suited to them, which would evoke the intended effect.

Unfortunately, there were idiots who had chosen incantations that reeked of their cringey tween phase.

Once a practitioner decided on their commands, it was nearly impossible to change them. The phrases became inextricably tied to the mental visualization of the effect.

Hana had, of course, moved past her middle school days and had picked straightforward incantations.

She observed Saku, admiring the way he had exterminated the shades in the blink of an eye. “He’s not Lord Ichinomiya for nothing,” she mumbled to herself.

He may have been young, but his sheer power was sure to have shut down any protests about his age.

After the arrival of the clan lord, the remaining shades in the field were quickly eliminated, and Hana was finally allowed to go home.

The next day, the school was abuzz with talk about the battle.

“I heard he’s the head of the Ichinomiya clan.”

“He was such a badass!”

“He obliterated the horde in an instant. I want to be as strong as him.”

“But why did the lord come in person? Isn’t he a Fifth Color practitioner?”

“Apparently. I heard that the Association had lacked intel, and a monster of a shade showed up where Class A was. Lord Ichinomiya

happened to be nearby and dealt with the situation. Luckily, no one in Class A was critically injured.”

And so on and so forth. The Ichinomiya clan became the new hottest topic.

“Hana, Hana! Did you know about him?” Suzu pressed Hana excitedly.

Hana was part of the Ichinomiya clan, after all, but there was little for her to say. “I did, but I’ve only seen his face once at the succession ceremony. It’s not as if I’ve ever talked to him.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that makes sense. I’ve never met the head of the Sankourou clan, either.”

“The Sankourou head is a woman, right?” Hana asked.

“Yup. I’ve only seen her from afar, but she was cool even from a distance!”

“Really?”

“Speaking of cool people...” Suzu was grinning from ear to ear, unable to contain her giddiness.

“What? What is it?”

“Okay, you’ll never guess! I finally got a boyfriend!” Suzu announced.

“Seriously?”

“Ultra-serious!”

Suzu looked happy from the bottom of her heart, but Hana couldn’t help but slump forward onto her desk, burying her head in her arms.

“Aren’t you happy for me, Hana?” Suzu asked, put out.

“I’m just shocked. To think that my pure, lovely Suzu has fallen into the grimy hands of some—some guy...”

“You’re overreacting. Yuu isn’t like that.”

“Yuu? That’s his name?”

“Yeah. Yuudai Namikawa. This is him,” Suzu said, holding up her phone for Hana to see.

The guy in the photo had showy bright blond hair, ears full of piercings, and a surfer-like tan. He looked like a player.

In other words, he was the polar opposite of Suzu, who was neat and radiated a sunny warmth.

Hana couldn’t help but grimace. “Um, S-Suzu? Is he really your boyfriend?”

“Yup! That’s him!” Suzu said with a bright smile.

Hana shut her mouth before she could say anything else. In fact, she didn’t know what to say at all. The words wouldn’t come out.

Suzu paid no attention to Hana’s internal conflict and chattered on about Yuu, her expression dreamy, the very picture of a besotted maiden. “I was being harassed in town, and Yuu swooped in to save me. He’s so sweet and nice, not to mention handsome and manly.

Everything about him is perfect. Everything.”

Hana was troubled. As Suzu’s friend, she was supposed to warn Suzu to be cautious, right? But she couldn’t help but hesitate when she saw Suzu’s joyful expression.

Still, there was no way she could entrust Suzu to the guy in the picture...

No, she shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. He could be gaudy on the outside but still be a good person like Suzu was saying.

Hana decided to wait and see for the time being. She listened to Suzu’s lovestruck prattle with a stiff smile pasted on her face.

After school, right as Hana was about to head home, she was captured by her homeroom teacher and forced to help with errands.

Suzu abandoned Hana to her fate, running off when the last bell rang. Judging by her happy expression, she probably had a date.

“Traitor!” Hana yelled, but the accusation fell on deaf ears. Suzu was too lovestruck to hear.

After she finished the errands, Hana walked home alone.

“Dammit. Why did the teacher have to single me out?” Hana grumbled.

“You should’ve escaped faster, Master,” Aoi said. “All the other students ran off immediately.”

He hadn’t materialized, so he was still invisible, but with no one else around, they were conversing freely.

“We had to stay so late yesterday to help with the shade cleanup. I thought for sure I’d be able to go home straight away today,” she said.

To be fair, school had started later in the morning to compensate for the time they had been conscripted for the previous night.

“I’m starving,” she complained.

“We’ll eat first thing when we’re home,” Miyabi said kindly. Her gentle voice acted as a balm for Hana’s irritation.

Hana decided to take a shortcut through the park, which was empty and pitch-black. Right before the slide, she stopped dead in her tracks, and Aoi and Miyabi both manifested at the same time.

“I’m going to have to eat late again... Is today my unlucky day or what?” Hana sighed deeply, absolutely fed up.

Why now, of all times? she thought resentfully, focusing her attention on the threat.

“It’s a strong one, or is it just me?” she commented. “It’s on an entirely different level from the runts yesterday. A shade this powerful showing up here, right by the school, is a bad sign.”

As far as Hana could tell, the shade was out of even the Class A students’ league.

“It does appear that way,” Miyabi replied. “This might be due to the

change of the clan lord.”

Hana and Miyabi were talking about how strong the shade was, but in fact, neither of them looked remotely concerned.

Aoi was the only one readying for battle. He drew the naked sword strapped to his back and faced the shade.

“Can you deal with it alone, Aoi?” Hana asked.

“No problem,” he said, raring to go.

Hana left him to it. “All yours.”

With a fearless grin, he squared off against the shade. “Come get me, you freak! I’ll be your opponent today.”

But the shade continued to stare at Hana, perhaps sensing the deep well of power within her.

Aoi moved to block Hana from its view. “If you want to fight my master, you’ll have to go through me first. Not that I would lose to the likes of you.”

“Aoi, stop chitchatting and kill it already. I want to eat.”

“Come on, Master. Let me look cool once in a while. I didn’t get to do anything yesterday,” he grumbled.

“Sure, sure, but I’m starving here!”

What an utterly carefree exchange.

The shade in front of them would have taken the expertise of one of the Association’s high-ranking practitioners to deal with, but Hana’s focus was on her dinner. The shade didn’t even register as a blip on her radar. That was proof of the faith she had in the shikigami she had created and his abilities.

“All right, all right, I can take a hint,” Aoi said, brandishing his sword, which was practically his height.

He sprung up to the top of the slide and sliced the sword down toward the shade’s head. The shade managed to dodge the attack by a hair’s breadth, but Aoi quickly followed up with a horizontal sweep. With a flick of his wrist, he brought the sword around in a broad arc.

Alas, the blow he landed wasn’t fatal. The shade leaped from the slide with Hana fixed in its sights.

Hana didn’t bat an eye. “Expand,” she said calmly and trapped the shade in a barrier.

The shade wrestled to break free of its sudden imprisonment, but since there were no witnesses, Hana hadn’t held back this time; the barrier she had conjured wouldn’t be easily broken.

Aoi attacked the shade with another brutal slash. Since he was Hana’s shikigami, his sword passed right through Hana’s barrier and cleaved the trapped shade in two from head to toe.

Once Hana was sure the shade was gone, she dissolved her barrier.

Despite the victory, Aoi was displeased.

“What’s wrong?” Hana asked.

"I wanted to kill it myself," he grumbled.

"But you did."

"Only because you trapped it in a barrier first. It doesn't count."

"Okay, okay. You'll get another shot in the future," Hana said dismissively.

She wanted nothing more than to be home already, and she turned around.

That was when she finally noticed the other person in the park.

Had they seen the whole thing? The possibility had Hana in a panic.

"Oh no," she muttered.

"Did you not conjure a barrier to keep away prying eyes, Master?" Miyabi asked.

"I forgot!" Hana confessed.

Usually, when Aoi and Miyabi manifested or when she fought with shades, she cast a barrier on her surroundings to prevent being seen. However, it had slipped her mind this time. She realized her mistake now, but it was far too late.

To top it all off, when she took a good look at the stranger, she realized she had been caught red-handed by none other than the clan leader, Lord Saku Ichinomiya.

"You're the one who did this?" he demanded.

"E-errr, um...", she stuttered.

"Those two are your shikigami?"

Aoi and Miyabi had stopped suppressing their power the moment the shade showed up. Even though they looked human, a practitioner with his skills would have known with a single glance that they were actually shikigami.

Backed into a corner, Hana took the only option available to her...

"You've got it wrooong!" she cried, her voice trailing behind her as she hightailed it from the scene of the crime.

"Master?!" Aoi called after her.

"Master!" Miyabi shouted.

The two of them chased after her in a tizzy.

After she had put some distance between her and the park, she cast a glance behind her. It looked like he hadn't given chase. Hana let out a sigh of relief.

"He saw us without a doubt. What do you want to do?" Miyabi asked, worried by the unexpected turn of events.

"We're safe...I think. It was dark. He couldn't have gotten a good look at my face. Besides, he might've seen me at the succession ceremony, but there were tons of other girls there. There's no way he remembers me...probably."

Despite her bluster, Hana wasn't confident at all. She could only pray that what she said was true.

“Aaagh. I messed up,” she whined.
She had taken precaution on top of precaution to hide her secret until now.
Today was definitely her unlucky day.
Dejected, Hana headed back home.



Saku was the eldest son of the Ichinomiya clan, one of the five great clans sworn to protect the pillars.

Ever since he was a child, he had been blessed with immense talents as a practitioner and had been reared to be the next in line.

What was more, Saku's father did not possess nearly the same level of skill. He might have been the head of the clan, but it took everything for him to maintain the barrier protecting the pillar.

For that reason, the clan wished for Saku to quickly reach adulthood and take over guardianship of the barrier as soon as possible.

Saku did not disappoint. He became the youngest practitioner ever to obtain the Fifth Color rank and his obsidian pendant.

To his immense frustration, he could not claim the same honor for the Lapis rank. He hadn't been able to beat the record set by the son of the Ichise family. To compensate, he attained the Obsidian rank with astonishing speed.

After racking up several years of experience as a practitioner, it was decided that he would succeed the clan name, assume the Master of the Barrier title, and officially take on the responsibility of protecting the pillar.

Among the leaders of the five great clans, he was going to be the youngest.

The transfer of power...did not go as smoothly as planned.

His father refused to relinquish the post.

The lord of the clan held power over the entire clan in the palm of their hand.

His father was a lackluster practitioner, but his lust for power was stronger than anyone else's.

However, he was helpless before the might of his wife, Saku's mother.

Saku also found it difficult to deal with his headstrong mother, so he sympathized with his father's plight. Nevertheless, Saku benefited from having his mother as his ally on this occasion.

Browbeaten by his wife, Saku's father reluctantly yielded his position as the clan leader. Without even waiting to see Saku settled, he set off on a solo journey to lick his wounds.

For his part, Saku felt refreshed with his nuisance of a father gone. The rest of the succession proceeded without a hitch. He took over the protection of the pillar's barrier.

With his mother overseeing all of the details and preparations for the succession ceremony, he was able to focus all this attention on the barrier's transfer.

He was grateful to her for that much, but only that much.

When he found himself swarmed by women the night of the ceremony, he regretted entrusting his mother with all the planning. He had made a grave error.

Of course, Saku wasn't without understanding.

He had succeeded the family without a spouse. Now he needed to find a wife, the sooner the better.

He understood what he needed to do, but he felt nothing but exhaustion encircled by the pack of women, their eyes gleaming wickedly.

Saku had never had much of an interest in women. It wasn't that he was attracted to men. It was that women had been fighting tooth and nail for a place at his side since he was young. Having faced their hunger and avarice all his life, it was natural he had picked up an aversion. He had no intention of spending the rest of his life with a woman who desired only money and power.

All he wanted was to get the decision over with as quickly as possible.

He would marry a woman with the skills and talent befitting the lady of the clan and the mother to the future heir. He could compromise at least that much.

That was why during the ceremony, he had called forward the rumored young lady who could summon a human shikigami even though she had been born to a branch family.

The young woman introduced herself as Hazuki Ichise. Saku commanded her to summon her shikigami, and she did.

The human shikigami who manifested indeed possessed great strength.

However, he fell well short of what Saku considered to be the minimum passing grade. His disappointment was all the more acute for his high expectations.

During the banquet, he had cast his gaze around the room, and his eyes landed on the one young woman who wasn't part of the mob around him. She was eating her meal alone in silence. In fact, she showed no interest in him whatsoever.

His interest was piqued. Then he realized that she looked nearly identical to Hazuki Ichise. She must have been the other half of the Ichise twins, the one who was considered scraps.

But why? From what Saku could sense, she didn't seem to be weak enough to deserve that much scorn.

Regardless, all thoughts of the mysterious twin were soon relegated to a corner in his mind, for not long after the ceremony, the shade attacks escalated.

The increase was an expected consequence of the barrier transfer. In fact, it was the first challenge every new clan head had to overcome.

Alongside Saku's duties patching up the protective barrier, he also helped manage the onslaught of shades.

Not long after the ceremony, he was informed that shades had swarmed an abandoned house. He went on scene to lend his aid and arrived to find confusion and chaos.

The shades were weak but many. As he worked to cull their numbers, the students ran around in a panic. He despaired of the future seeing them unnerved by such small fries. He seemed to remember that when he had been a student, he and his classmates had been much more capable.

Everything made sense when he learned that the students on the grounds were from Class C.

However, he was perturbed that there were enough shades to necessitate the dispatch of Class C students in the first place.

There was no time to waste. He had to repair the barrier, and fast. In order to do that, he needed the support of a strong spouse.

That was when Saku met *her*.

The day after the battle at the derelict house, Saku sensed the presence of a shade leagues stronger than the minor nuisances from the previous day. The feeling was coming from the direction of a park, and he rushed over posthaste.

When he arrived, three people were already there, and they destroyed the shade without breaking a sweat.

Saku knew immediately that two of the three were shikigami, but he had never heard of any practitioners who could summon two human shikigami. As lord of the clan, that kind of information would have been brought to him right away.

He approached the person to see that she was wearing the uniform from Obsidian High. He was surprised that such a capable practitioner should be younger than him. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen her face before, but he just couldn't remember where.

He intended to learn more about her, but she fled before he could say anything.

"Master, shall we follow?" A pigtailed girl in a maid uniform was suddenly standing next to him. She was Saku's shikigami, Tsubaki.

"No," he said. "I'll have someone look into it once we're back at the

house. She was wearing the Obsidian High uniform. She should be easy to find.”

“Oooh, that’s a scary face...,” Tsubaki said.

Saku’s grin was all teeth. “Let’s go home.”

And so they returned to the Ichinomiya residence.

Before Saku could ensconce himself in his room, he was ensnared by his mother. He could guess what she wanted to talk about.

“Have you found a suitable lady to be your bride yet, Saku?” she asked.

As of late, she posed this question to him at least once a day.

But that day, Saku had a different answer than usual. “Yes, Mother. There is a girl who has piqued my interest.”

His mother had surely been expecting him to say no, and her eyes widened at the surprising response.

“Ahh. Where did you meet...? Never mind. Well then, who is she?” she asked haltingly.

“Who knows?” he replied flippantly.

“I beg your pardon. What is the meaning of this?” she demanded.

“I don’t know her name yet, but I’m planning to find out.”

His mother narrowed her eyes in disapproval at his reply. “In other words, nothing has changed, has it? Listen, it is critical you marry should you want to restore the barrier,” she reprimanded. “If you cannot pick a suitable candidate, then perhaps consider inviting back Miss Hazuki from the Ichise family. She possesses a human shikigami. Surely, she is satisfactory.”

“Yes, that’s right, the Ichise family. Hmm...Ichise?” Saku paused, the memories of the Ichise family’s daughters flashing through his mind. In particular, the face of the “scrap” twin popped into his head.

He snickered softly.

His mother watched him laugh suspiciously. “Exactly what is so amusing?”

“I am not laughing at you, Mother. I merely missed what was right under my nose. We live in a small world.” He straightened up and looked directly at his mother. “Please rest assured. I promise I will bring home a bride soon.”

“You will not let me down?” She still looked doubtful, but temporarily placated by Saku’s serious response, she retired.

Saku sprang into action. “Time for me to look into the Ichises’ younger daughter.”



A week flew by after Hana’s encounter with Saku.

At first, she had lived in fear, jumping at shadows. She kept a wary watch on her surroundings on her way to and from school, unsure when Saku would appear in front of her. She would have looked mighty suspicious to anyone watching her.

However, contrary to her fears, Saku never showed, and she gradually forgot to be anxious.

Then in blew the wind of fate that would change her destiny forever.

One day, on her way home from school, a black luxury car rolled up alongside her. Many of the Obsidian High students came from wealthy families, so luxury cars were a common sight. Even Hana's family was rich enough to employ servants. As a matter of fact, Hazuki was chauffeured. Hana found such arrangements stifling and had opted out.

The black car came to a stop right next to Hana.

She paid it no attention and kept on walking, but a man in a suit exited the driver's seat and planted himself in front of her, blocking her way. She looked up, annoyed.

The man smiled warmly in an attempt to ease her wariness and asked, "Miss Hana Ichise, I presume?"

Nonetheless, it was difficult to relax when a stranger came up to you and addressed you by name. She steeled herself to flee at a moment's notice.

The man was rattled by her cagey attitude and rushed to reassure her. "H-hold on, please! I'm not a suspicious individual."

"Ohhh, of course not. Not like that's exactly what someone with ulterior motives would say," Hana spat.

"No, I swear!" he said.

She remained unconvinced by his desperate pleas.

"The master merely wishes to speak with you, Miss Hana. Will you please get into the car?" the driver coaxed.

"I will not," she answered brusquely.

She made to pass, but he grabbed her arm.

"Eeyah! Let me go, you pervert! Creep!"

"Y-you're mistaken. This is all a misunderstanding! I beg you. Please listen..."

"Police! He's trying to kidnap me! Heeelp!"

However, Hana's screaming only made the man more nervous, and he gripped her even tighter, which in turn led Hana to scream even louder.

They were stuck in this never-ending cycle of manhandling and screaming when the passenger climbed out from the back seat of the car. "Jesus Christ. What is going on out here...?"

That exasperated voice sounded awfully familiar. Hana seemed to

recall hearing it not too long ago.

She stopped struggling and turned toward the passenger. Standing by the car was the person she least wanted to see in the whole wide world, Saku Ichinomiya.

“Damn!” Hana’s expression twisted with annoyance.

Incensed, Saku shot back, “‘Damn’? Is that any way to address the head of your clan?”

“Oh dear, you must have misheard. I said nothing of the like. Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh,” Hana said, laughing to cover up her slip of the tongue.

Saku stared at her but dropped the subject, to Hana’s relief.

But that didn’t mean she was free just yet.

“I have business with you. Get in,” he ordered.

“May I decline?”

“Do you want everyone to know what happened in the park the other day? If so, fine by me,” he answered with a fiendish grin that made him look more like a criminal than the leader of one of the five great clans.

However, as far as Hana was concerned, even if Saku did leak what she did in the park, no one would believe him. So...

“Hmm, I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean, though.” She played dumb.

Saku narrowed his eyes. “I’ll guess I’ll just have to tell your parents you called me a pervert,” he threatened.

“Agh! Fine, anything but that!!” she cried. Such an accusation would garner so much annoying family drama.

“Then stop complaining and get in. I’m busy.”

“What’s with your holier-than-thou attitude? It’s not as if I asked for you to come harass me,” she grumbled under her breath.

“Did you say something?”

“No, not a word!”

The man had ears like a bat. He picked up on the quietest of whispers. Shuddering, Hana climbed reluctantly into the back seat of the car.

The driver stayed outside, so it was just the two of them.

Since Hana had no idea what Saku wanted to talk about, she was incredibly anxious.

Luckily, he didn’t keep her waiting.

“I hate beating around the bush, so I’ll be direct,” he said. “Be my bride.”

“No way.”

“.....”

Hana shot him down without a second’s hesitation. Her instantaneous refusal left him at a loss for words.

Hana took advantage of his confusion to reach for the door handle and declare, "There you have it. If that's all, I shall take my leave!"

"Ah, hold on! I'm not done..."

But no one in their right mind would wait obediently when ordered to, so whatever it was Saku said, Hana wasn't around to hear it. She dashed out of the car faster than she'd ever run before and sprinted for home.

"Master..." Aoi might have been invisible, but Hana could sense his burning desire to speak.

"I didn't hear anything! You hear me? Not a thing!" She clapped her hands over her ears as if to persuade herself.

She felt as if she'd heard something that defied imagination, but surely her mind had just been playing tricks on her. That was right. That was the only explanation.

Please let that be it.

Hana prayed fervently.



Morning dawned the day after that nightmarish conversation.

Hana ordered Aoi and Miyabi to stay home, and predictably, both of them immediately expressed their displeasure.

"For what reason, Master?" Miyabi asked.

"I'm going with you no matter what," Aoi insisted.

"No means no," Hana said.

"But why?!" Aoi refused to accept the command or drop the matter.

"You both saw the clan lord yesterday, right?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" Miyabi asked with a quizzical tilt of her head.

"Didn't you notice? Neither of you were visible, but that man, he was able to pinpoint where you were. He looked right at you."

"...!"

Neither of them had realized and were shocked speechless by Hana's revelation.

"I don't know what he wanted from me...", Hana muttered.

"Your hand in marriage?" Miyabi suggested.

Aoi nodded. "Uh-huh. That's what he said."

"Not a chance! Hazuki, maybe, but me? Please. What a joke," Hana said dismissively.

She wasn't stupid enough to take his gibberish about marriage at face value. He must have had a hidden agenda.

"In any case, until I can determine what his motives are or make sure he never comes near me again, I refuse to bring the two of you

with me. If people find out about you, it'll throw a huge wrench in my plans for the future."

"And what exactly are those plans, Master?" Aoi asked.

"To live a life as far from practitioners as possible," Hana said. "I'm going to find work in a normal company, save up for retirement, and enjoy my sunset years to their fullest!"

"My, my, you don't plan to marry, then?" Miyabi asked doubtfully. Hana had left off marriage in the timeline she had just presented.

"I wouldn't know how to explain the two of you to a husband if I were to find one. God forbid word got back around to my parents, and they dragged me back home. No thank you. I'll stay single. I won't be lonely as long as I have the two of you."

"Will everything happen according to your neat plan, I wonder?" Miyabi mused.

"I'll make sure it does. Everyone deserves to live out their old age in comfort and without worry."

Hana was resolute. She had no intention of throwing herself into a world of fighting and violence. She wanted to live safely and freely.

"So in conclusion, I'm sorry, but I'm leaving the two of you to house-sit for the time being," Hana said.

Aoi and Miyabi shook their heads in exasperation but also fondness. Ultimately, they relented and nodded.

That being said, it was too much of a risk for Hana to go out alone, so Azuha, who normally stayed at home, accompanied her to school. Since Azuha was small, when she perched motionlessly in Hana's hair, at first glance, she looked like a normal hair clip.

Hana went to school with Azuha and attended class as usual, but on her way home she was met with an unpleasant sight.

Saku was waiting for her next to the same black car from the day before. His legs were planted firmly, and his arms were folded.

He didn't move when she drew near, but his eyes darted around her as if he was looking for something. After a beat, he said, "You didn't bring those two with you today."

Her heart stopped. "Wh-whatever do you mean?"

She knew it. He could sense Aoi and Miyabi's presence—and the lack thereof.

It might have been futile to play dumb, but she certainly wasn't going to confirm his suspicions.

"...Well, forget it. More importantly, about our talk from yesterday," Saku said.

"Ahhh, the silly little remark I misheard, you mean? My hearing has just become so awful these days. I do apologize," Hana said airily.

"You didn't mishear. Be my bride."

"....."

Hana ran without another word.

“Hey! Get back here!” Saku yelled. Unlike the previous day, this time he gave chase. Since his stride was longer, he would surely catch up to her before long.

With no other choice, Hana called out, “Azuha, enthrall!”

“Yes, Master.”

Azuha lifted off Hana’s hair and began to fly around in circles as if she was dancing. By doing so, she summoned a fog that hid Hana from sight.

“What the hell?!”

Saku’s yell of shock faded into the distance behind Hana as she ran away.

The day after her successful escape, he showed up again.

The second Hana spied Saku waiting for her in the distance, she turned on her heel and took a different way home.

And again the day after that.

Saku ambushed her on her secondary route home. The first words out of his mouth were “I want to make you my wife. Listen to me.”

Hana said, “No thanks,” and used Azuha’s powers to hightail it out of there.

The next day after that, Saku appeared once again, saying, “Be my bride,” and Hana fled once again.

The accursed game of tag repeated itself several more times, until Hana finally got sick of it.

She steeled her resolve to confront him. What in the world could Saku want from her to chase her so persistently? She was going to make him reveal his true intentions once and for all.

That day, when Saku predictably appeared in front of her, she stood her ground instead of running.

“Are we done playing hide-and-seek?” Saku teased. One corner of his mouth curled upward in a smirk.

Hana raised her hands in surrender. “I’m tired of being stalked. I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“As you should’ve done from the start,” he said arrogantly with a scornful snort. He jerked his chin toward the car. “Get in.”

Hana was ticked off by his imperious attitude but reined in her anger and climbed into the car as told.

The driver started the car and drove them to a high-class hotel. They entered and were guided by the staff to a private dining room.

“Is there anything you want to eat?” Saku asked.

“No thank you,” Hana said.

“Whatever you say. The warabi mochi here is highly rated, but if you insist, I’ll eat them by my—”

“I’ll eat them,” she said, doing an about-face. Sweets were her

weakness.

Shortly, the staff came in with the warabi mochi and *sencha* tea before leaving the two of them alone to talk.

Hana was mesmerized by the pillowy and tender chilled mochi dessert. She took out her phone and took photo after photo, the camera snapping with every shot. Saku watched her, his patience running drier with every second.

Finally, she set down her phone.

“Satisfied?” he asked.

“Yes. Time to dig in!” She picked up a piece of the mochi with the bamboo skewer and took a bite. She closed her eyes and savored the delightful treat, melting into the confectionary’s heavenly sweetness.

“...and...so... Hey!”

Hana was awakened from her state of blissful rapture by a karate chop to her head. “That hurt! What gives?!” she complained.

“You’re not listening to a word I’m saying!” he yelled.

“That doesn’t give you the right to hit me!” she retorted. “I’m going to report you.”

“Try it. I dare you. I’m the head of the whole Ichinomiya clan. You’re fighting a losing battle.”

“Tsk.”

It was frustrating, but he was right. As the lord of the clan, he had the authority to turn black into white. It didn’t matter if he was guilty.

“Then, begging your lordship’s pardon, why would your exalted self possibly be interested in a humble girl like me?!”

“Stop it with the honorifics and whatnot. You’ve been mixing casual and formal speech this whole time. Just speak normally,” he said.

“Fine. Happily. So why?” She threw propriety straight out the window with no hesitation.

“You sure changed quickly... Well, whatever. I’ll say it again. Be my bride. I want to enter a contractual marriage with you.”

“A what marriage?” She didn’t understand. “...There’s so many things I want to ask, I don’t know where to start.”

“I’ll explain from the beginning. This time, listen carefully.”

“Okay, okay.” Hana set aside the skewer. This wasn’t the time to be eating warabi mochi.

“You are aware, of course, that I have recently taken over command of the clan,” Saku began. “Unfortunately, the transfer of power always results in a temporary weakening of the barrier, which in turn leads to a surge in attacks by shades.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’ve been pouring my energy into the barrier to make it whole again, but actually, it cannot be done by one person. Now, this is a secret to all but select members of the main family, but the barrier can

only be repaired with energy from a spouse as a supplement,” he explained. “I’m not married yet, but it’s imperative that I find a powerful bride as soon as possible. And then you showed up.”

Hana’s hand shot up. “Question!”

“What is it?”

“If all you need is someone with enough power to fix the barrier, it doesn’t have to be a wife, does it?”

“The barrier needs both yin and yang energy to be complete. Female and male energy, in other words. The energy from the two people needs to be equal in strength, and having two people with close relations is ideal. If I had a younger sister, she could have potentially fulfilled the role. However, I only have a younger brother, and there is a significant gap between our abilities. Other than blood relatives, the only other person fit to complement the lord of the house is a spouse.”

“What about your mother?”

“My mother is weak. The gap between us is too wide. She would hamper the repair process rather than help.”

Hana understood more or less what he was trying to say. For the sake of the barrier, he needed a powerful wife—the sooner the better—which was why the succession ceremony had doubled as a matchmaking session. So far, she could accept his explanation.

“So why are you proposing to *me*?” she asked.

“I saw you exorcize the shade, and I saw your shikigami. You have another one with you. There.” Saku looked over near Hana’s head.

Hana lifted a finger up to her face, and Azuha alighted on it. “As you can see, this little one is as low-ranked as a shikigami can be.”

“Don’t lump me in with common rabble. I can tell that she’s hosting—and suppressing—a fair amount of power.”

As expected of the Ichinomiya clan lord, Azuha’s true strength hadn’t escaped his notice.

“And you, too. You’re hiding it, but you’re quite the powerhouse yourself,” he continued.

“You’re imagining it,” she said.

“But why hide? With your talent and strength, you needn’t ever be called your sister’s scraps again.”

Hana realized that he was a hard opponent to deceive.

No matter how much she tried to sidestep his questioning, she couldn’t shake his belief that she was strong.

Hana took a deep breath and sighed it out. “Won’t Hazuki do?”

“She won’t. I had her show me her shikigami. Her powers are far below my minimum requirements.”

“Aren’t I the same?”

“No. I’m not so green as to misjudge someone’s level. You’re leagues above your sister, strong enough to make me offer you the position by

my side,” he said. “Besides that, you don’t trip all over yourself to please me. That, more than anything, intrigues me.”

It was almost refreshing how much confidence he had in himself.

He was a Fifth Color practitioner. Perhaps he owed his obsidian pendant to that very unshakable faith.

Hana only had one thing to say to the self-assured man sitting before her. “I decline.”

“Your reason?” he asked.

“I have no intention of flaunting my powers before anyone. All I want is to graduate safely and spend my life free from anything to do with practitioners. I’ll find a normal job, work until retirement, build a house somewhere in the countryside, and live out the rest of my years in peace. My plans do not include marrying you,” Hana said, turning Saku down flat. The gaze she turned on him was unwavering and reflected her clear resolve.

“Like I said before, our marriage will be nothing more than a contractual arrangement. Once the conditions have been fulfilled, you will be compensated accordingly.”

“No need. I’ll earn my living without any of that.”

“How?” Saku’s lips tilted in a sly smile.

Hana had a bad feeling.

He continued, “You were planning to seek a position with an Ichinomiya subsidiary, no?”

How did he know that? No, that was a stupid question. Of course he had dug into the person he was considering to be his wife. Investigation was needed before bringing her into the family.

“Y-yeah, I was...,” she replied reluctantly.

“Do you think I would think twice about pulling strings to make sure every single door was closed to you?”

“Wha—?! That’s low!” Hana stood up, slamming her hands on the table, driven by anger more than thought.

“Say what you will. I’ll get what I want by any means necessary.”

“You’re a pain in the neck!”

“...Once the contract is fulfilled, you will be rewarded one billion yen, along with lands in your name wherever you wish. A house will be built for you as well. If you still desire to work in one of our companies, you shall have your choice of position with a salary and a hefty retirement bonus, which will allow you to play to your heart’s content in your old age.”

“...”

Tempting. The thought flashed through Hana’s mind unbidden before she came to her senses.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. “No, no, no, no, no, I won’t be deceived. If I help you, I’ll be roped into doing practitioner’s

work.”

“How is that different from how you’re living now? Aren’t shades targeting you regularly anyway? That was what happened in the park, no?”

“Ugh...” Words of rebuttal refused to come out. Everything he said was true.

“There’ll be a commotion, sure, but were you to be my bride, I’d protect you from any backlash from your family,” Saku promised. “Well? Don’t you want to see your parents’ faces when they find out that the daughter they dismissed as useless is going to become the lady of the house?”

When he put it that way, she could only answer yes. Yes, she wanted to see it. She really, really wanted to.

Hana, the one her parents had abandoned, was Saku’s choice. Not Hazuki, who was beloved by all and doted upon, but Hana.

To her parents, there could be no greater offense.

“Besides, don’t think you’ll be able to hide all your life. I’m not the only one with sharp instincts. Someone else will notice sooner or later, and when that time comes, wouldn’t it be reassuring to have the might of the Ichinomiya clan at your back?”

“That’s...”

Hana lowered her head into her hands. The possibility Saku was describing wasn’t out of the question. She had been worried about that exact scenario ever since Saku had discovered her secret.

“...Up until now, I’ve been made a fool of over and over again,” Hana said. “I refuse to become the tool of the same people who ridiculed me only for them to turn a new leaf once they find out about my awakened powers.”

“Of course. I’ll protect you from scum like that.”

“I want to live in peace with my shikigami in the countryside after I retire.”

“Once the contract has been fulfilled, you’ll be free to live as you like. You’ll have a home for your personal use and all the money you could want.”

Saku was checking off Hana’s boxes one after another.

She could ask for no better conditions than these. She was running out of objections.

“Gah! This is infuriating!” She knew her best choice was to accept Saku’s proposal, but she was annoyed that she would be falling right into his hands.

“There’s no reason to be troubled. You stand to gain a lot from this transaction.”

“And lose just as much...,” she grumbled.

“Shall we consider it a done deal?” Saku extended his right hand.

She hesitated, but only briefly, before gripping the proffered hand. "You'll keep your promises?"

"Yes," he said. "Pleasure doing business, Hana." The smile accompanying his words was friendly, without any hint of ulterior motives.

Hana was shocked to hear her name from his mouth accompanied by that open grin, but she refused to let him see that he had rattled her. She averted her gaze and said, "Same here...Lord Ichinomiya."

"Wrong answer. Try again!"

Displeasure was splashed across Saku's features, but she couldn't see why. "Excuse me?" she said.

"We just agreed to get married, and here you are, calling me Lord Ichinomiya. It's Saku."

"I hardly think it makes a difference... Fine. Saku, then. Saku."

She had done as he had asked, but he furrowed his brow nevertheless. "Normally, you'd add an honorific or something, no? I *am* older than you, after all."

"You'll go bald if you fuss over every little thing. It's fine, isn't it? We sound like equals this way."

"Fair enough."

That was how, through some turn of fate, Hana became the contracted bride of the lord of the Ichinomiya clan.

Chapter 3

After their discussion, Hana and Saku left the hotel and returned to the car.

Inside, Saku handed Hana two sheafs of paper.

“What’s this?” Hana asked.

“The marriage contract. It’s reassuring to have everything in writing, no? Check them over. If you find them satisfactory, we’ll sign them immediately.”

“When did you have these drawn up?” she asked, taken aback. “Errr, let’s see here. Compensation upon successful completion...”

Outlined in the contract were the terms Saku had recited earlier: one billion yen, land and property, and recommendation to a full-time position.

“The contract period ends when my abilities are no longer needed to sustain the barrier? Is that correct?”

“Yes. As long as we restore the barrier properly in the beginning, I’ll be able to maintain it by myself afterward.”

“I see. Got it. Oh, by the way, how old are you, Saku?”

The question was more than overdue, but what excuse could she make? She had simply never had an interest in the age of the clan lord before.

“Twenty-four,” he replied.

“Younger than I thought.”

“Are you implying that I look old?” He stared at her pointedly.

She hastily backpedaled. “That’s not it. I just thought you would have to be older to take over the clan.”

“I am a genius, after all,” he said with a haughty expression.

She looked at him like he was no better than a caterpillar.

“What’s with that look?” he demanded.

"Aren't you embarrassed to be saying that about yourself?"

"It's not as if it isn't true, so what's the problem? More importantly, did you verify everything?"

"Yeah. I'm done."

Hana signed both copies of the contract and gave them back to Saku, who then signed his own name next to hers.

"We'll each keep a copy." He passed her another sheet. "Next, I need your signature here."

It was the marriage registration.

"What?!" she exclaimed. The sight of the real thing left her shaken.

Saku's signature was inked in the field for husband. The witnesses section had already been completed as well.

"Hurry up and fill it out," Saku urged.

"Whoa, hold up. We're doing this *now*?"

"Obviously. We're working on a contract, which is not valid until you're officially my wife. Don't chicken out now."

He could say whatever he wanted, but it wasn't as if she could turn her nervousness off.

Sure, she had agreed to the conditions, but now that she was holding the official marriage registration, it all felt more real. Her hands trembled.

"Get on with it," Saku said.

"I—I got it already. Stop rushing me."

Hana wrote down her information carefully so as not to make any mistakes and returned the registration to Saku.

Saku thoroughly scanned the document. His mouth curled upward, satisfied by what he saw. "Good. I'll have this turned over to city hall today."

Had this been a few years ago, Hana would have needed her parents' consent to get married before she was twenty, but the law had been revised to count eighteen-year-olds as legal adults. Therefore, Hana could marry without asking her parents for permission.

"Afterward, we'll get your parents' blessings," Saku said. "Never mind that we'll already be married by then."

The car pulled up to Hana's house, and Hana got out alone.

"I'll pay you a visit during the next holiday, so make sure you're at home," Saku said.

She was still flabbergasted that they were submitting the marriage registration without her parents' approval.

He must have been confident that they would give their permission.

No, that wasn't the reason. It was simply that what her parents thought didn't matter to him at all.

Saku was young, but he far outranked her parents.

Hana returned to her room.

Aoi and Miyabi came out to greet her.

“You were out late today. We were worried about you,” Miyabi said.

“I’m sorry. Something unexpected happened,” Hana answered.

“Did you run into a shade?” she asked.

“No, not exactly...” Hana wasn’t sure how to explain. Her words stuck in her throat.

Then Azuha landed on her shoulder and said, “Master is now a married woman.”

“What?” Miyabi looked shocked. She didn’t understand.

“Big Sis, what do you mean?” Aoi asked, his face thunderous.

Since Azuha was Hana’s first shikigami, Aoi and Miyabi always treated Azuha with courtesy and addressed her as their older sister.

“Master was blinded by money and agreed to become a bride,” Azuha said.

“Wait a sec, Azuha...,” Hana interjected.

The way Aoi and Miyabi were staring at her hurt.

“Master, care to explain yourself?” Aoi asked.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Miyabi followed up.

“...Yes,” Hana admitted.

The two shikigami threw her question after question, all of which she answered without hiding anything. After they found out all there was to know, they stared at Hana with exasperation.

“You’re definitely being deceived, Master,” Aoi concluded.

“I agree...,” Miyabi said.

“Gah...,” Hana groaned.

Their looks of pity stabbed her straight through the heart, but it was nothing more than what she deserved. From an outsider’s perspective, it was too good to be true. Only fools would fall for such an obvious scheme.

“But—but if he keeps his promises, I can enjoy my retirement years with all of you,” Hana protested.

She had already come this far. It might have just been her stubbornness talking, but she didn’t want to believe she had been tricked.

“Well, if you’re fine with it, I’ll go along with it...,” Aoi said.

Miyabi added, “You should exercise more caution, Master. Otherwise, you’re going to be scammed.”

“It might already be too late for that, Miyabi. Didn’t you sign the marriage registration already?” Aoi asked in confirmation.

“That I did,” Hana said with a helpless laugh. She knew she had been hasty. All of a sudden, the fear set in. “Wh-what do I do?!”

“Even if you ask us that...,” Aoi said, at a loss for how to respond to Hana’s desperate pleas.

"You're already married. There's no turning back now. I wish you had at least talked to us first." Miyabi furrowed her brow, equally troubled.

"You're right... It didn't cross my mind." She had been too focused on the money. She gripped her head with her hands in despair, but shortly, she gave up on thinking. "Meh, it'll work out somehow. Ha-ha-ha." She laughed brightly, but it only looked forced.

"You think it'll turn out all right, Miyabi?" Aoi asked.

"Worst comes to worst, we can assassinate the clan head and run away together." Miyabi followed up her crude suggestion with a warm and gentle smile.

Aoi, who valued Hana more than anything else in the world, nodded firmly in assent.

Then came the promised holiday.

Hana hadn't heard a single word from Saku and had completely erased him from her memory. At the moment, she was watching anime and bawling her eyes out.

"Bwaaaah. I end up crying no matter how many times I watch this. It's a classic," Hana said.

Miyabi had been watching Hana, but she could no longer keep quiet. "Do you have the time to be watching anime like this, Master?"

"Why not?"

"Lord Ichinomiya is coming today."

Hana had clearly forgotten the agreement until Miyabi had just reminded her. "Riiight. Now that you mention it, that rings a bell," she said.

"Master..."

"Don't look at me with those accusatory eyes. He hasn't contacted me at all since then, so of course I forgot about it. He's really coming? Maybe that was his idea of a joke."

But right as Hana finished speaking, they heard the sound of footsteps running toward the room.

Miyabi and Aoi vanished immediately.

"Miss Hana!"

It was Sae. She was distraught. Her usual composure and efficiency were nowhere to be found.

"What's wrong?" Hana asked.

"The lord of the Ichinomiya clan has arrived! He has requested your presence as well," Sae sputtered out.

"You can't be serious..."

Hana cleaned herself up quickly and went to the main house.

She entered the room where Lord Ichinomiya—Saku—was waiting.

“Wow, you really came.” Hana’s mouth tightened into a line.

Saku’s face clouded over in response. “Do you have a problem with that? Don’t tell me you forgot...?”

“Hana!” her father interjected. “Is that any way to speak to the lord of the clan? You’re being rude!”

You’re the one being rude, interrupting the lord while he’s speaking, Hana thought mutinously.

She turned to look at her father, who was in the room with her mother and Hazuki. Yanagi was absent as usual.

“Hurry up and take a seat!” her father ordered.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said with a here-we-go-again tone.

She was about to sit next to Hazuki when Saku stopped her. “Wait, Hana. You’ll sit by my side.”

“What?” The word, laced with betrayal, had been spat out by her father.

Now that Saku was sitting in her house, she finally believed that the events from a few days ago were real after all. She pictured her parents’ faces when Saku broke the news and almost burst out laughing.

However, she put on a stoic expression and sat down next to Saku as he had directed. Her parents and Hazuki were still in the dark as to the reason Saku had come. They stared at her, the question *Why are you sitting next to him?* clear in their eyes.

Hana was enjoying herself.

“Ah, um, Lord Ichinomiya, what brings you to our residence today?” her father said, getting to the heart of the matter. He was unable to be patient any longer.

Saku flashed a wicked smile, glanced over at Hana, and opened his mouth to speak. “I came to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“Th-that’s—,” her father stuttered, his face brightening.

Her mother looked overjoyed at the declaration. She wrapped an arm around Hazuki’s shoulders and said with pleasure, “You did well.”

Why were they ignoring Hana, the one sitting by Saku’s side, in favor of praising Hazuki?

What gives? thought Hana as she waited for Saku’s next words.

“I am here to seek your blessing to marry your daughter sitting beside me, Hana,” Saku continued.

“Huh?” Her father stared blankly at Saku.

Hana desperately held back a peal of laughter and pressed her lips tightly together.

Her parents had immediately assumed that by “daughter,” Saku had meant Hazuki.

But Hana was a daughter of the Ichise family, too. More than that,

she was currently sitting next to Saku.

Her parents' reaction told Hana that she was as good as invisible to them, but she didn't feel any sadness. She had long since gotten over how her parents saw her.

"H-hold on, please! Are you sure you mean Hana? Not Hazuki?" her father asked.

"Yes."

"But Hana has no talent as a practitioner. Her shikigami is a butterfly." Her father was failing to understand the conversation and persistently called attention to Hana's inferiority. "Hazuki, on the other hand, has a human shikigami and is at the top of her class at Obsidian High. In my humble opinion, she is a far more suitable candidate to be your wife!"

"Be that as it may, I choose Hana. In any case, I may have said that I came to ask for your blessing, but we've already submitted the marriage registration. Hana already belongs to the Ichinomiya family."

Hana understood two things from Saku's presence here: that the registration was official and the depth of his seriousness.

"Wha—? You submitted the registration without our knowledge? What nerve!" Her father's face was flushed red with anger.

What was the reason behind his fury?

His indignant words were certainly not on Hana's behalf.

Saku was unmoved in the face of her father's anger. He snorted dismissively, arrogant as always. "This is the daughter you've abandoned by the wayside. Why are you angry? I've heard that you focus all your affection on your elder daughter. I'm merely taking the child you don't want off your hands. In fact, you should be compensating me."

Her parents looked away awkwardly, their gazes darting around shiftily. So they were aware of the negligence Saku was accusing them of. That was surprising to Hana.

"B-but...", her father stuttered.

"How tedious. Your consent is unnecessary to begin with. Hana is legally an adult, so she does not need your permission to marry. Hana is already mine."

"That's..." Her father's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Hana stared at him coldly.

Was it truly such a shock that Hana had been chosen instead of the Hazuki they fawned over? Her father's judgment had failed him twice over, once as a parent and again as the head of the Ichise family.

If they had raised Hana the way they had Hazuki, the Ichise family would have received great honor and reward as the family of the clan lord's bride.

However, Hana had no intention of asking Saku for any favors on her family's behalf. They had fallen low among the branch families, and as far as she was concerned, there they could stay. That was Hana's revenge.

"That's all I came to say." Saku terminated the conversation. "Hana."

"What?" Hana said.

"Gather your belongings now. You'll live in the Ichinomiya residence from today on."

"What?! Now?!" What the hell was this egomaniac saying? Indignation welled up within Hana. "You've given me zero notice! Impossible!" she shouted.

"A few days of luggage is acceptable for now. We'll hire movers for the rest."

"No, no, no, no, you're not listening."

"Stop stalling. Let's go," Saku said.

Hana was struck by a sudden regret that she had agreed to marry such a cocky man, but she realized that if she stayed, her life in the Ichise house was sure to only grow more unbearable. She reluctantly returned to her room to pack.

"I might've made a mistake," Hana mumbled to herself. "It's too late to pretend nothing ever happened... Plus, I'd hate to lose out on the reward."

The power of money is frightening, Hana thought to herself as she packed her school supplies, several days of clothing, and daily necessities.

She sensed a presence behind her and turned to find Hazuki standing there.

"What's wrong? You've never come here before," Hana said.

"Why...? Why is it you?" Hazuki asked, her voice sounding strained and hollow.

"What do you mean?" Hana understood what Hazuki wanted to say, but she asked anyway.

I'm not a nice person, Hana thought. A low laugh escaped her.

Hana's amusement inflamed Hazuki's temper. "What are you laughing about? Are you making fun of me?" she demanded. "It's not too late. Hand him over to me. There's no way someone like you could be the lady of the clan! Know your place! You're weak, Hana."

"...I'm weak, so you're more suitable?" Hana asked.

"That's right."

"Hey, tell me, do you seriously believe that?" Hana pinned Hazuki with a humorless gaze.

Hazuki found herself overwhelmed by the pressure Hana was exerting, something Hana never usually did. "Wh-what? It's true, isn't

it? With my skill level, I'm more suited to Lord Ichinomiya than you are. You won't be of any help."

"Maybe that's true... But, Hazuki, do you really want to marry Saku?"

"Of course I do. It's an honor to be chosen by the lord of the clan. My marriage would be for the sake of the whole family."

"The sake of the family, huh?" Hana let out a deep sigh.

"What now?"

"Can you cut it out, Hazuki?"

"Cut what out...?"

Hazuki didn't understand even now. Hana had given her plenty of candid advice in the past, but it seemed like she had taken none of it to heart.

"Stop worrying about other people," Hana advised. "You always say you have to do it for the family, for Father. Or because Mother said so, or because your friends expect you to, yada yada. You never do anything you've decided for yourself."

"You're wrong!"

"At this rate, you won't be Hazuki Ichise anymore," Hana warned.

This might be the last chance the two of them got to talk like this. Before they went their separate ways, Hana gave Hazuki, her other half, her advice, and she meant it from the bottom of her heart.

"What do you mean? I'm me. Who else could I be?" Hazuki said, confused.

Hana hadn't expected Hazuki to understand her, but she hoped that one day Hazuki would come to realize the meaning of her words.

"Remember when we used to talk as kids? You used to confide in me all the time," Hana said. "You told me everyone's expectations were too heavy. That you were happy to be counted on, but it was painful at the same time. When did you stop complaining about those things?"

"....." Hazuki didn't respond.

"That's all I have to say. See ya, Hazuki."

You were precious to me, my other half.

Hana threw a brief smile Hazuki's way. It was meant for the girl Hazuki used to be. Then Hana left her room and returned to the main house, where Saku was waiting.

"You're too slow," Saku said.

"If you had told me in advance, I would've prepared beforehand." That was what she said, but what she meant was that it was Saku's fault for springing the news on her.

It was unclear whether the jab had gotten through to Saku, but he left off further complaints and simply said, "Come." He exited the house.

“Thank you for taking care of me all these years,” Hana said.
With one last bright smile, she turned and put the Ichise residence behind her.



In the car back to the Ichinomiya residence, Hana exclaimed all of a sudden, “Gwah!”

“What is it? There’s no need to shout,” Saku said.

“Whose fault is that? Because you didn’t give me any warning about moving, I left without even saying good-bye to Sae!” she cried.

Sae was the one who had always taken care of Hana. After she had fetched Hana for Saku, she had left to go shopping.

Hana hadn’t said a word to the other servants, either, despite all they had done for her over the years.

“You can always go back and see her,” Saku said.

“You think I can waltz back in there with the way I left things? My parents would use it as an opportunity to vent their spite and envy.”

She could picture it already. *They would say something like, He threw you away already? and laugh and laugh and laugh.* This was a serious problem.

“Then you can write a letter.”

“I suppose there’s no other way,” she said.

“More importantly...,” Saku began.

Hana stared at him with indignation. “How dare you dismiss my concerns so easily. Especially when this is all your fault for rushing me!”

She was angry at Saku’s dispassionate attitude about this Sae issue. That said, there was no way he could have known what Sae meant to her. She was mostly taking out her frustrations on him.

But her anger wasn’t entirely unjustified. After all, it was true that Saku wasn’t blameless.

“I get it, I get it. My bad. Are you satisfied? Now quiet. I have something important to talk about.”

“Satisfied? Not even a little, but I’ll hear you out for now.”

She was irritated that he was treating her like a child throwing a tantrum, but since she wasn’t a child, she wasn’t going to continue arguing for argument’s sake.

“You’ll be living in the Ichinomiya residence from now on. Once we arrive, I want you to first meet my mother,” Saku said.

“I expected as much, but only your mother? What about your father?” Hana asked.

His expression soured. “Don’t worry about my shitty excuse for a

father. He's just one of the many *former* clan lords. Ancient history."

"You don't get along?"

"No, we don't. I don't want anything to do with him. Not now, not ever."

"Oh really?" Hana said simply.

Saku stared at her. She had been the one to ask about his father, but she seemed so indifferent to his answer.

"What?" she asked.

"Just marveling that you didn't tell me I should get along with my parents or treat the last lord with more respect or whatever," he replied.

"Well, it's hardly going to be convincing coming from me, is it?"

He should know very well that she and her parents were not on good terms...or rather, that they had a relationship of mutual disregard.

And why would he know that, one might ask? The obvious answer was that digging up information about one of the clan's branch families was a snap for the lord of the clan.

"You're right. It wouldn't be believable at all," Saku said and chuckled like he found something amusing. Hana didn't understand. "Anyway, first, you'll meet my mother, and then we'll hold the ceremony in a week."

She was floored by his declaration. "In a week?!"

"Yes, the sooner the better," he said. "Once we inform the branch families about you, I can finally focus on repairing the barrier."

With the reminder that the entire purpose of their marriage was for the sake of fixing the barrier, Hana understood Saku's reasoning. However, she still had her doubts. "Question. We got married because it's needed for the barrier, right? There shouldn't be any reason to share the news or hold a ceremony. We'll be getting divorced once the barrier is whole again anyway, so isn't it better to keep our mouths shut and not invite unnecessary trouble?"

"Impossible. Simply submitting a marriage registration does not a marriage make. The registration is paperwork, nothing more, nothing less. We have to promise ourselves to each other in front of the branches and have them recognize the marriage. Only then will anything you do affect the barrier. Therefore, the ceremony is nonnegotiable."

"Is that how it works?" she asked skeptically.

What a monumental pain of a tradition.

She had assumed they would be able to keep the marriage a secret and divorce without any fuss later on, but it seemed like she had thought wrong.

She was exhausted just imagining the ruckus they would invite by

making their marriage public.

"Prepare yourself," Saku warned.

Hana tilted her head quizzically.

"My mother and everyone else still see you as nothing more than a failure. My mother has even tried before to convince me to take your older sister as my bride instead. Her reaction may be more frightening than your family's. I'll support you the best I can, but I won't be able to watch over you all the time."

"It is what it is," she said. "No worries. I'll be A-okay." In contrast to Saku's serious demeanor, she was fairly nonchalant.

"Aren't you taking this too lightly?"

"I haven't suffered all the comparisons to Hazuki over the years for nothing. I've had to put up with snide comments and whispers behind my back every day. Besides, with you protecting me, I won't need to suppress my powers, right? I'll return any insult twice over." Hana grinned impishly. She wasn't going to be hurt by a few mean remarks.

Saku's expression softened seeing her strength and resolve. "How reliable you are."

"All you need to do is focus on the barrier, Saku... And the matter of my reward."

"And out comes your true motive." Saku smiled, which was what Hana had been aiming for, even if the smile was a touch exasperated.

"You know me," she said. "Make sure you keep your promise."

"I know, I know. I'll even throw in an inconvenience fee as a bonus."

"Score! You sure live up to your title, Lord Ichinomiya. I hit the jackpot!" She beamed.

While Hana was celebrating, Saku sneaked a hand around the back of her head. She watched him in bewilderment as he leaned in closer and closer.

Wow, his lashes are so long, she had time to think, before those shapely, slender lips of his closed the final distance between the two of them and brushed softly against her own.

The soft press of his lips disappeared as suddenly as it had come. The kiss had lasted no longer than a second.

Hana froze in shock, her vision tunneling. "Wh-wh-wh-what was that?!"

"A kiss. What else?" Saku said.

"But why? What reason could you have to kiss me?!" she demanded.

What about their conversation could have possibly suggested this was the appropriate time for a kiss?

"We're husband and wife now. It's only natural for us to kiss, no?" he responded, calm and collected.

It was as if he seriously didn't see any problems with his actions.

As if she was the one making a hoopla over nothing.

But she was clearly in the right. “That only applies to real couples, right? Our marriage is just a contract!”

“We turned in the registration, so aren’t we a real couple?” he said.

“Y-you’re not wrong. But kissing isn’t in the contract!” she protested.

“If we’re going by the contract, kissing isn’t off the table, either. There shouldn’t be any problem.”

“Grr...” She had no more counterarguments. “Then let’s amend the contract.”

“I don’t want to.”

Hana grabbed him by the collar and started shaking him back and forth.

“Gah, stop it,” Saku said.

“Then let me change the contract!” she demanded.

“Like I said, I don’t want to.”

“Er, pardon me...,” a third party said tentatively, interrupting their conversation.

Hana turned around and glared at the interloper.

It was the driver. Now she felt bad for glaring.

He had opened the door and was waiting for the two of them to get out.

“Um, sorry,” she said.

“No, it is I who must apologize for interrupting the two of you,” the driver said.

“Huh? Ah—” Hana shoved Saku away—they were closer together than she had realized—and laughed, trying to play it off.

“I am the head of the clan, you know. Your handling of me is too rough,” Saku grouched. He stared at her pointedly, but it was lost on Hana.

“You’re the one at fault. You k-k-ki...” She blushed furiously, her own words bringing back the memory of what had just happened.

Seeing Hana’s innocent reaction, Saku grinned wickedly. “I see. That was your first.”

Her cheeks burned.

“Well, well, well, I’m looking forward to the future,” he said.

“Saku!” she yelled, using anger to hide her embarrassment. She was at a loss for what else to do.

He held out a hand toward her. “Come on, we’re here.” He smiled gently.

Her heart skipped a beat at the unexpected warmth of the smile. She found herself placing her hand in his palm as if it had been drawn in by a magnet.

He tugged her out of the car with one firm pull.

Her eyes landed on the facade of the main residence, a place she had visited only once before.

Anticipation and unease mixed inextricably inside her at the thought that she would be living here from now on.

Based on what Saku had told her, the lady of the house wouldn't be quick to approve of her, but that was no more than what she had anticipated to begin with. She had agreed to his proposal fully aware of the challenges she would have to face.

Hana mentally steeled herself. She was doing all of this for her dream of living out her old age in peace. "I'm ready. Be it *oni* or snakes, bring it on!"

"I'm sorry to inform you, but even demons flee at the sight of my mother," Saku said dryly.

"Listen, I'm trying to pump myself up here. Don't be such a wet blanket," she said, turning a stony gaze on him.

"My bad. All I'm saying is you should be careful."

Knowing he had her best interests in mind, Hana didn't complain any further. But what kind of person was Saku's mother exactly to drive the normally cocksure Saku to say such things...?

"After hearing what you just said, I think I want to go home after all," she said.

"It's too late. Give it up."

Hana dug her heels in, but Saku dragged her inch by bitter inch into the house anyway.

When they entered the house, a kindly old woman with white hair greeted them. "Welcome home, Junior."

"Junior..." Hana's shoulders quaked as she held back her laughter. She got a kick from hearing the high and mighty Saku knocked down to the level of "Junior."

Saku flushed, shaking with embarrassment. "Towa! I told you to stop calling me that!" he yelled at the elderly woman.

Towa was entirely unmoved by his shouting and laughed warmly. "Pardon my rudeness, Master. Now then, might she be the wife you have been speaking about?"

"Ah yes, she is..." he said to Towa. "Will you stop laughing?" He chopped Hana lightly on the head, and she finally got her amusement under control.

"My name is Hana. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance," she introduced herself, bowing gracefully. Her relationship with her family might have been tenuous, but she was still the daughter of an Ichinomiya branch family, and she had learned her basic manners.

"What a polite young lady. I am employed by the Ichinomiya household. My name is Towa. Please do not hesitate to call me if you

should require anything.”

“I’ll be in your care from now on.”

With the introductions out of the way, Saku said, “That’s enough for now. Where is Mother?”

“The mistress is eagerly awaiting your arrival, Junior,” Towa said.

“Towa...”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh. Right, right. Master.”

They must have had this exchange any number of times before. It was clear that Towa would continue to address Saku as Junior no matter what he said.

Towa led them to a room, and they stopped in front of the sliding doors. Towa announced them. “Madam, the young master has returned.”

“Enter.” The command was given in a crisp tone of voice that practically chilled the air.

Towa slid open the doors, and Hana and Saku stepped inside.

“Welcome to the Ichinomiya house.”

The woman waiting for them had almond shaped eyes and a gaze of steel. Her hair was tied up immaculately; there wasn’t a single strand out of place. In her elegant features were traces of Saku’s own appearance. She was wearing traditional Japanese clothing, which suited her perfectly.

Her eyes bore into Hana. There wasn’t a speck of kindness in them.

Hana’s legs wouldn’t move; it was as if they’d been bound together. Saku laid a hand on her shoulder, the gentle pressure of which released her from her petrification. “My name is Hana. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, my lady.” Her voice was stiff with nerves. She had wanted to be more eloquent, but she was having enough trouble making sure her smile didn’t cramp up.

Regardless, the woman’s expression didn’t defrost at all in response to Hana’s attempt at a smile.

“Am I right to presume that you are not the older Ichise daughter?” Saku’s mother demanded.

“You are correct. I am the younger daughter,” Hana replied.

Saku’s mother turned her merciless stare on Saku. “Saku, do you know what this girl is called by those around her?”

“Her older sister’s scraps, leftovers, and other such names, I believe?” Saku answered flippantly.

Saku knew how strong Hana truly was. The derogatory nicknames meant nothing to him.

But his mother was a different story. “If you already knew, then why did you pick this girl?! I will not accept this urchin into the Ichinomiya household. A fool like her is not suitable for our family,” she said, enraged.

Hana shrank away from the pressure Saku's mother was exerting. She now understood what Saku had meant when he said even *oni* ran away from his mother. The woman was terrifying.

Saku faced his mother's wrath as if nothing was out of the ordinary. At the moment, he seemed horribly reliable.

"That does not matter. I am not seeking your approval," he said.

The words were like knives to Saku's mother. They clearly hurt her. "What did you say?" she said icily.

"This is my decision as the head of the clan. I won't hear any complaints, not even from you, Mother."

"Saku!" she yelled at him, but he did not waver.

"I have nothing further to say. The ceremony will be held in a week."

"I will not accept it."

"Then you are free to decline the invitation. I will not force you to attend. You may have authority as the mother of the lord of the clan, but Hana will be the lady of the clan from now on," he said, standing his ground until the end. "Please excuse us."

Saku grabbed Hana's hand, stood, and exited the room summarily. Hana bowed on her way out, but Saku's mother's gaze was still cold.

"...Hey, is it all right that you said all that?" Hana asked Saku.

"I had no other choice. As you can see, she is a stubborn person. As long as she thinks of you as incompetent, she won't consent to our marriage. However, we do not have the time to wait for her to change her mind. We can't delay repairing the barrier. You, too, must have realized that the shades' attacks have increased lately."

Hana nodded. Unfortunately, she had firsthand experience of the phenomenon Saku was talking about. Even though she was in Class C, she and her classmates had still been summoned to help deal with the shades the other day.

"Would openly showing my power solve the problem?" she asked.

She had been hiding her skills up until now, but she wanted to avoid a feud with her mother-in-law, temporary as their relationship might be. If she could pave the way to a good rapport by revealing her powers, then she would do so. Any trouble that came out of it, she would redirect toward Saku for him to deal with.

But Saku, familiar with his mother's personality, was far from enthusiastic about her suggestion. "That's a possibility. However, my mother is not just stubborn but also single-minded. Now that she has judged you to be inept, she will not quickly change her mind and give you her approval."

"That's annoying."

"Eventually, she'll come to realize how strong you truly are. In the meantime, we must be patient," Saku said.

“Sure, but I’m expecting adequate compensation,” Hana said, keeping her tone light.

Saku tousled her hair, leaving it a mess.

“Hey!” she protested indignantly.

She was about to demand an explanation when Saku smiled at her warmly, blowing away her anger in an instant.

“You’re so optimistic, Hana. I’m almost jealous of your positivity.”

“...And you’re full of yourself. Just who do you think you are?”

“Lord Ichinomiya. Bow down before me, peasant.”

“No way.”

And so they passed the time with friendly bickering.

After the meeting with Saku’s mother, Hana was shown to a room that had been prepared for her use.

The room was provisioned with everything she would need to start her new life without any inconveniences. Apparently, Saku had arranged everything himself.

“Is there anything else you’d like?” he asked her.

“No. If anything, you’ve prepared too much,” she replied. He had even had the room stocked with her favorite brand of makeup. It was actually scary how thorough he had been.

“...Why are you making that face?” Saku grimaced. Hana was looking at him as if he was no better than a stalker.

“It creeps me out how thoroughly you researched...,” she said bluntly.

“You should choose your words with more tact. Even I can get hurt, you know,” he said.

“Whoops, sorry, I didn’t mean to say what I was truly thinking.”

“Is that your idea of tact?”

In the middle of their banter, the door slammed open, and a maid with ponytails and dog ears flew into the room. “My beloved Master! How could you leave Tsubaki here all alone? Gosh! Where have you been?” She threw herself on Saku and hugged him tightly.

Hana watched the spectacle, grimacing with disgust. “M-my beloved’...? You have your cute puppy-eared maid call you ‘beloved’?” she asked in shock. “So that’s your fetish. I never would’ve guessed just looking at you...”

“You’ve got it all wrong! It’s not what you’re imagining!” Saku protested.

Until a practitioner actually summoned their shikigami, they had no idea what the shikigami was going to look like. When Hana had created Aoi and Miyabi, it wasn’t as if she had sat down, decided on their genders, and designed their appearances herself.

So the fact that Tsubaki had turned out to be a girl with animal ears

hadn't been up to Saku. But the frilly maid uniform, on the other hand...

"I can't believe you've been hiding a maid fetish all this time. And with a face like *that*..." Hana said, shying away.

Saku rushed to refute her. "This is my shikigami, Tsubaki. Wearing maid uniforms is *her* hobby!" He peeled Tsubaki off him and put distance between them. "Tsubaki, introduce yourself."

"I am my darling Master's lover, Tsubaki!" she said.

"I knew it," Hana said.

"What do you mean?!" Saku said to Hana. He turned to Tsubaki. "And you! Stop saying things people will misunderstand!" He looked at Tsubaki wide-eyed and smacked her lightly on the head.

"Awww, that hurt! You're so meeean, darling," she mewled. Everything she said sounded like it was capped with a heart emoji.

However, Tsubaki might have looked adorable, but the massive power resting inside her was anything but.

Hana brought a hand up to her chin, watching Tsubaki with a narrowed gaze. "Maybe on the same level as Aoi..."

Hana had created Aoi to be a combat specialist, so he was more powerful than both Azuha and Miyabi. Tsubaki appeared to be just as strong.

"Aoi?" Tsubaki parroted with a tilt of her head. Her sharp ears had picked up Hana's muttering.

"Ummm, he's my shikigami," Hana replied.

"Oooh, I wanna see! Where is he?" Tsubaki asked.

Hana was caught off guard by the question. She had never told anyone about Aoi and Miyabi before. Saku had seen them during the incident in the park, but only for a moment. She had never purposefully summoned them in front of people.

"Uhhh..." Not knowing what to do, Hana looked to Saku with a troubled expression.

"Bring them out," he said. "I want to see them, too. I didn't get a good look at them before, and I want Tsubaki to meet them. We're going to be living together from now on. This is important."

Hana took a brief moment to think and ultimately concluded that there wasn't any point in hiding them now. Precious though they were to her, she decided to summon them. "...Okay. Aoi, Miyabi, show yourselves."

Azuha had been resting on Hana's hair like an ornament all this time, but now she flew around to Hana's shoulder. At the same time, Aoi and Miyabi appeared in the room.

There was little doubt that Saku had at least an idea of where the two shikigami were even when they were invisible, because he had been looking at the spot where they appeared before they actually

manifested.

Aoi was sullen-faced and presented a stark contrast to the smiling Miyabi.

“Intros, please. Both of you,” Hana directed.

“My name is Miyabi, and I am one of Lady Hana’s shikigami.” Miyabi bowed gracefully.

“I’m Aoi.”

Aoi’s introduction was curt and cold, but apparently it had been enough to win over Tsubaki’s heart.

“Omigosh, look at you, sexy!” Tsubaki blushed prettily and threw her arms around Aoi.

Aoi’s stormy mood morphed into confusion at her sudden embrace, and he lost his cool. “Wha—? Hey! Get offa me!”

“Don’t wanna. You’re Aoi? You’re just my type!” She clung tightly to Aoi like a suction cup, unbothered by his struggling. “Master dearest, from now on, I’m no longer your lover. I’m gonna be Aoi’s lover instead!”

“Sure, sure, do whatever you want,” Saku said with absolutely zero interest, waving a dismissive hand at her.

“Uh, what?! No way! Don’t say such irresponsible things! And you, let go of me!” Aoi yelled.

“Hooray, it’s a done deal!” Tsubaki said.

“Master! Help me!” Aoi cried.

Aoi stretched out a hand in supplication, but there was nothing Hana could do.

Miyabi watched over everything with a twinkle in her eye. Saku was entirely disinterested.

Tsubaki—that troublemaker—refused to budge an inch. Even if Hana were to say something, she wasn’t Tsubaki’s master, so she had no control over the shikigami.

Then Azuha spoke up. “If you don’t like it, just hide yourself again.”

Aoi immediately saw the wisdom in Azuha’s advice and vanished.

Out of all of them, Azuha had proven to be the most composed.

“What gives? Aoi disappeared.” Tsubaki wilted in disappointment.

Saku said to her, “You go, too. You’re being a bother.” He waved her off like she was a bug.

“Rude!” she complained, but she also blinked out of view.

Azuha and Miyabi were the only shikigami left. Saku sized the two of them up. The way he was staring at them was far from courteous, but Miyabi bore his ill-mannered gaze without dropping her smile.

Finally, Saku opened his mouth to speak again. “I see. Your shikigami are quite powerful.”

“Of course,” Hana said, puffing her chest out with pride.

Azuha and Miyabi weren’t as strong as Aoi, but Hana had taken

great pains to create them both. Her shikigami were her pride and joy.

“Azuha is the butterfly,” she introduced.

Azuha fluttered in front of Saku. “My name is Azuha.”

“It’s rare for a low-ranking shikigami to be able to speak,” he commented.

“She couldn’t before, but when I came into my power on my fifteenth birthday, I gave her a portion. From that point on, we’ve been able to talk to each other.”

“She’s unbelievably strong for a butterfly shikigami.”

“That’s right. It’s all because Master gave me so much power.” Azuha was proud to receive Saku’s compliments.

Azuha could speak—even if her sentences were clunky—and act of her own volition, feats that were extremely rare for low-ranking shikigami, as Saku had pointed out. As a matter of fact, Hana didn’t know of any other examples besides Azuha.

Saku’s compliments weren’t merely flattery.

After watching this exchange, Miyabi, who had been smiling politely the whole time, opened her mouth and said, “Lord Ichinomiya.”

“Saku is fine,” he said.

“In that case, Lord Ichinomiya, I’m sure you’ve already heard about our circumstances from my lady. To us, she is an indispensable person. I entreat you to treat her with kindness and respect,” Miyabi said.

“I will.”

“If by some chance you hurt her or make her sad...” Miyabi trailed off and flashed Saku a smile full of hidden meaning. Her eyes were not laughing at all, and in their humorless depths was a warning: Should that time come to pass, he should be prepared. “Take care that you do not forget.”

“I’ll remember,” Saku promised.

Before Miyabi disappeared like the other shikigami, she smiled one last time. Her final smile was the gentle one she usually wore.

Azuha returned to her perch on Hana’s head and stilled.

“Your shikigami are incredible but frightening,” Saku said.

“Aren’t they good kids?” Hana smiled proudly. However, she alone had been charmed by the prior conversation.

“To you, yeah. I certainly wouldn’t want to be on the wrong side of their power. And you have three of them... You said you came into your power at fifteen?”

“Yup.”

“Before then, you were a failure as rumored?”

“More or less. I had enough skill as a practitioner to conjure Azuha, but on the whole, I was as weak as everyone said I was. Having the

talented Hazuki as my sister certainly didn't help things. I always looked excessively weak compared to her."

If they hadn't been twins.

If she hadn't had an exceptional older sister like Hazuki.

Then maybe she wouldn't have been subject to so much ridicule.

Then maybe she wouldn't have become so cynical.

Or if her powers had awakened earlier...

But had that been the case, Hazuki might have been compared to Hana instead. Hana didn't know if that would have been preferable.

The distance between Hana and Hazuki, between their standings, was no wider than a sheet of paper was thick.

That was why Hana struggled to resist speaking her mind to Hazuki, even though she pretended that it wasn't any of her business and that she didn't care.

She knew nothing she said would get through to Hazuki, but she couldn't turn a blind eye, either.

"Was there any sort of trigger? Can you think of anything?" Saku asked.

"Not at all. The power just came welling forth like I'd broken through a shell. I was surprised, myself. I didn't have any warning before it happened."

"I see. I thought there might be a chance that other people awakened the way you did, but your story doesn't give any clues."

"There hasn't been anyone like me in the past?"

He shook his head. "No, not that I've heard of."

As the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, Saku should have been aware of any information pertaining to practitioners, so if he said he didn't know, then maybe Hana really was the only exception.

There might have been people hiding their power the way Hana was, but that, more than anything, seemed unlikely.

See, the usual reaction to obtaining a massive amount of power was sheer, unadulterated joy. People in that situation would normally want to announce their sudden fortune to the rest of the world straightaway.

"Well, we don't know why the change came over me, so there's no use spinning our wheels," Hana threw out after watching Saku worry over the problem.

"That's true..."

He seemed reluctant to change topics. As leader of the clan, he was possibly thinking that their ongoing battle against the shades would be a hell of a lot easier with the addition of other awakened practitioners.

But it was useless to think about it now.

They changed subjects.

“Oh, right. The holiday ends today, but I’d like for you to take a break from school until the wedding,” Saku said.

“What for?” Hana asked.

“We only have a week, you know. There’s a mountain of things that need to be done. You won’t have time to go to school.”

“Ugh, are you serious?” She scowled.

“Starting tomorrow, literally every minute of your day is going to be scheduled. Prepare yourself.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She groaned.

Saku’s answering smile looked exactly like the malicious grin of a shade to Hana.

Like Saku had warned her, the week leading up to the ceremony was insanely hectic. There were outfits to be coordinated, the faces of guests from the branch families to be memorized, and a thousand other things. As the lady-of-the-clan-to-be, Hana was inundated with tasks she had to do.

She felt like her head was going to burst from how busy she was. Her body was pushed to the brink. The cycle of physical and mental exhaustion repeated day after day.

For better or worse, her packed schedule left no time for her to meet with Saku’s mother again.

Actually, that was probably a blessing. Saku was also buried with work, so she rarely saw him. A one-to-one encounter with Saku’s mother could be nothing more than a catastrophe, one that Hana was eager to avoid. She doubted it was possible to have a proper conversation with Saku’s frigid mother, who disapproved so strongly of her.

Saku had a younger brother as well, but Hana hadn’t met him even once.

Since they were living under the same roof, she had figured that she would be introduced to him at some point, but doubtless, he would probably be just as disparaging as his mother.

Even the servants of the household looked down their noses at Hana.

Of course, they were still professionals and did their jobs without complaint. Hana was the one their master had chosen and brought home, after all, and she was already officially a part of the family register. However, their eyes when they looked at her were cold as ice, and their contempt was palpable.

Their unwelcoming attitudes were so blatant that Hana itched to advise them to work on their acting skills.

Furthermore, apparently, the servants routinely insulted Hana behind her back. Aoi often returned from his strolls around the house

with a stormy expression.

Aoi didn't want to badmouth Hana to her face even if he was only repeating what other people said. He refused to tell her what he overheard, but he quietly shared everything with Miyabi.

Hana had Miyabi start accompanying Aoi whenever he left Hana's side as a precaution. Miyabi was meant to prevent Aoi from exploding after hearing one too many insults against Hana. The problem was that Miyabi's thoughts, too, were starting to turn in a dangerous direction, so it was a toss-up on how effective of a deterrent she really was.

There was hardly any point in getting worked up about a few spiteful words at this point, but Aoi and Miyabi couldn't stand their master being scorned. To make matters worse, the mockery carried over to Azuha as well.

Azuha usually suppressed her powers as per Hana's orders. Other than practitioners like Saku who had razor-sharp intuition, everyone thought she was nothing more than a run-of-the-mill butterfly shikigami.

The fact that Hana was always accompanied by such a low-ranking shikigami was merely one more reason for the servants' contempt.

Technically, there was no reason for Hana to keep her powers a secret anymore. Azuha didn't need to suppress her strength, either. However, Hana didn't think it was time to reveal her true powers yet.

She would bide her time until she could announce the truth with a bang, in order to generate the greatest shock.

Until then, she asked her shikigami to be patient.

Though, she was worried that Aoi would reach his breaking point before then...

Finally, the day of the ceremony was upon them.

Hana was woken up before the break of dawn to start the preparations. She was told she needed to participate in a ritual purification and was then thrown unceremoniously into a beautiful pond on the Ichinomiya residence's grounds. Unfortunately, the pond was filled with ice-cold water.

She suspected the ritual to be mere harassment on the part of the servants who disliked her so, but Towa brought her hot water after the cleansing and informed her that it was an age-old tradition of the clan. Only then did she accept that she wasn't being bullied.

After that, she ate a light breakfast and was dressed in a pure-white kimono. Her hair was bound and lavishly decorated with orchid ornaments.

Azuha fluttered over and landed in Hana's hair, becoming part of her hair dressings.

That was Azuha's reserved seat from long before, and today was no different. Azuha would ride in her hair and accompany her the whole time. Hana's updo looked all the more opulent with Azuha's rainbow coloring added into the mix.

In the middle of her preparations, Saku came into the room, wearing a black haori overcoat on top of hakama pants. He looked at her with so much intensity that it felt as if time had suddenly stopped.

Hana was unnerved by his stare. "What?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing. Just thinking that even a monkey can look good dressed in the right costume," Saku replied.

"That's all you have to say?" She glared daggers into him. Her reaction was more than justified. He was still a smart-ass even on an occasion like this.

Saku stared at Hana and smiled. "I'm kidding. You look so beautiful, I didn't know what to say."

Her eyes slipped to his easy grin, and her heart beat faster.

Saku might have had a sharp tongue and was overly arrogant, but no one could deny he was a first-rate man. His beatific expression was disarming.

Hana looked away to hide how shaken she was and said, "Monkey. Costume. You took the words right out of my mouth."

"I take it you find me handsome, then?" Saku smiled softly and reached out to caress her cheek.

They stared into each other's eyes.

Saku was the first to break the silence. "Hana... I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I got you involved in my problems. All you wanted was a quiet life, right?" he said. "But once I learned of your existence, I couldn't pretend I never met you, and I can't let you go. I'll make you a promise instead. As your husband, I'll do everything in my power to make you happy. So stay. Stay by my side."

His voice flowed softly over her skin. His words permeated her entire body.

"You were certainly persistent," she said, "but I was the one who chose this in the end. Maybe I'll regret my decision one day, but I don't regret it now. So don't you let me down, Saku."

Hana laid her hand over the one Saku had placed on her cheek and smiled.

Saku smiled back. "I won't. Trust me."

Those words in the mouth of such a self-confident man had a persuasive power like nothing else. She was convinced by those words to believe that everything would be all right.

"All right. It's time to go. Are you ready?" Saku asked. He held out his hand.

Hana took it without hesitation. "Bring it on!"

The wedding ceremony began.

The heads of the branch families had gathered in the hall in wait.

No one could believe the news.

When they had heard that the clan lord had chosen a daughter of the Ichise family, they had naturally assumed it was the older sister.

It was frustrating that their own daughters hadn't been chosen, of course, but if the exceptional older twin was to be the bride, they would bow out of the contest with grace.

But then it came out that it was the younger twin, not the older, who was to be the next lady of the clan.

Compared to her sister, the younger daughter was no better than a flunky. The older sister had taken all the power, leaving the younger with nothing but the dregs.

She, of all people, had been the one to steal the head of the Ichinomiya clan's heart?

How could anyone believe that? How could anyone possibly accept that?

The protests poured in like a flood whose waters showed no signs of ebbing.

As the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, Saku went around to each of the dissenting branch families, earnestly advocating on Hana's behalf.

Hana was far from useless. In fact, it would have been a folly to choose anyone else but her, he urged.

However, his words were difficult to swallow. There was hardly a single soul who accepted his entreaties at face value, but most people took the stance that if the clan lord was prepared to go that far, they had no choice but to acquiesce, reluctant as they were.

So not only was the main family dissatisfied with Hana, but disapproval ran rampant among the branch families, too.

Such were the circumstances under which the wedding ceremony was held.

As part of the Ichinomiya clan, all the branch families were in attendance, including, of course, the entire family of the bride, the Ichises.

The only two people conspicuous in their absences were Saku's mother and younger brother.

Their refusal to attend was their quiet way of expressing their protest against the marriage.

On the day of the ceremony, there were still people among the branch families who were skeptical as to whether Saku and Hana would *really* marry. That was how unexpected Hana was as a candidate to be Saku's bride.

And there was no family more doubtful than the Ichises themselves.

Their daughter had been the one selected, but there was no hint of joy on the family's faces.

In a display of willpower, the onlookers gritted their teeth and plied the family with congratulations and well wishes, but the parents, who should have been overjoyed, only smiled stiffly in return.

The eldest son had a scowl on his face and was in a thunderous mood, making him difficult to approach.

Hazuki was seated next to him, and perhaps as a side effect of his temper, no one spoke to her, either, even though everyone was dying to know what she was feeling. They weren't interested out of concern but rather because they found it entertaining.

Finally, the day's leading actors made their entrance.

Hana stepped into the hall after Saku, who led her by the hand. When she saw everyone from the branch families seated in the room, she almost lost her nerve, but Saku must have sensed her tension, for he squeezed her hand gently.

Fortified by his encouragement, Hana took a deep breath and stepped forward.

The gazes of the crowd packed into the hall washed over her. They were surely in shock.

Many of the guests wouldn't have known what Hana looked like, though it was possible they would have recognized Hazuki. They picked her apart with their eyes, inspecting her from head to toe. It was discomfiting, but she was bolstered by the warmth of Saku's hand.

She had to be confident. She wasn't doing anything wrong, so she refused to look down. She walked forward with her head held high.

Once Hana and Saku were seated at the head of the room in the places for the groom and bride, the officiant, an elderly man, opened the ceremony.

"The wedding ceremony between Lord Saku Ichinomiya, the head of the Ichinomiya clan, and Miss Hana Ichise shall now commence."

His words were the cue for the ceremonial *sakazuki* cups to be placed before Saku and Hana. Towa first poured sake into the wide and shallow cup before Saku. When he finished drinking, she served Hana.

Hana was an adult in the eyes of the law, but the legal drinking age was still twenty. For the purposes of the ceremony, she pretended to drink the sake.

She set her cup back down. That concluded her role in the ceremony.

The wedding was short and could hardly be called satisfying, but it was much better than a long, drawn-out affair.

Hana was relieved to be done with the proceedings. Saku smiled at her as if to say *Well done*.

Next was the banquet for guests.

A plethora of dishes were brought out one after another, and the feast began in silence.

The ambience was not so much solemn as cautious. The guests traded furtive glances, tentatively feeling out the room. The initial lack of energy could be chalked up to the fact that Hana was the bride in question, but once the sake had been poured, the atmosphere loosened up.

The mood turned festive, and the hall grew rowdy with conversation.

Adults lined up before Saku to refill his cup with sake, but no one approached Hana.

That was just fine by her.

On the contrary, she was happy to put up with the far-off stares and whispers instead of becoming prey for all the gossipmongering women.

Hana was too difficult to talk to, so instead, the young ladies her age gathered around Hazuki, making a show of consoling her sister. She could hear them from where she was sitting.

"I'm sure you must be very disappointed, Hazuki," one girl said.

"Of course she is," another cut in. "That good-for-nothing stole the seat next to the lord."

From the outside, it might have looked as though they were indignant for Hazuki's sake, but in reality, they were simply angry that they themselves had lost to someone they considered beneath them.

However, there were a few in the crowd who truly admired Hazuki and were fired up on her behalf.

"It's unacceptable!" one of Hazuki's supporters said. "Hazuki is the perfect candidate. That woman must've pulled some sort of trick."

"Obviously, she did something underhanded. Otherwise, there's no way someone so talentless would've been selected as the lady of the clan."

The one who put a stop to the free-for-all on Hana was Hazuki herself.

"Thank you, everyone, but you shouldn't say such things," Hazuki said. "Hana is my precious little sister. As long as she's happy, I'm..."

She followed up her words with a sad smile, playing the role of a gentlewoman holding back her own tears for sister's sake perfectly. A display of peak femininity.

"How compassionate you are to put someone like her before yourself," one of the ladies complimented.

"Kind to a fault as always," someone else added.

Hazuki's followers sang her praises as if nothing came to them more naturally.

Listening in on the conversation, Hana chuckled quietly as she sipped her juice.

Saku noticed her laughing and asked, "What's so funny?"

"Just Hazuki," Hana answered.

"Hmm?" Saku glanced over at Hazuki before returning his gaze to Hana. "Did something happen?"

"She's practically bursting at the seams with anger, but in front of everyone else, she has to pretend to be the perfect honor student. She's currently desperately shoving down her true feelings," Hana explained. "Her pride must've taken a blow, but she can't say anything bad about me. I can tell how irritated she is. I almost spit out my juice, it's so laughable."

Saku looked at Hana, smirking as she was, with fond exasperation. "...You're incorrigible."

"Yup. But the ones who made me like this were my parents and the people around me."

She was well aware that her personality was warped.

Was there ever a chance that she would grow up to be kind and tender and lovely when she had been raised in such an ugly environment?

She didn't bear a grudge toward her parents—only a low-simmering anger.

"You don't want revenge on your parents?" Saku asked. "That's more than feasible now that you're the lady of the clan."

"Not interested. My parents and I fell out of contact a long time ago. I had my revenge when you picked me instead of Hazuki," Hana said.

"How noble. If it were me, I would've crushed them."

"Yup, sounds about right. You don't strike me as the type to forgive anyone who betrays you."

"Do you think of me as some sort of tyrant?"

"You didn't realize? I'm shocked." Hana wasn't joking, either. She was genuinely surprised.

"You're..." Saku covered his face with one hand.

Is he crying? she thought at first, but then he burst out snickering, tamping down on the amusement threatening to rush out of him.

"I will never understand your sense of humor," she said. "Was there something funny just now?"

"To me, there was."

"What?"

"Your attitude toward me. I've never met anyone who spoke to me so candidly. I am Lord Ichinomiya, after all." Saku still had yet to get

his expression back under control. He gazed at Hana. "When I'm with you, sometimes I forget my position. You're the first person I've ever truly enjoyed talking with."

Hana's heart started racing when Saku flashed one of those rare smiles at her. Her heart couldn't take it when he pulled that killer smile out of nowhere.

She glanced around them. Many people were staring at Saku with amazement, and the room was abuzz with whispers.

"Lord Ichinomiya is laughing."

"Is he *that* taken with that girl?"

"Perhaps we must change our attitudes toward her..."

The whisperings of the guests reached Hana's ears. "It's just a little bit of laughter. Aren't they overreacting?" she murmured.

Tsubaki manifested next to her. "My beloved Master never usually cracks so much as a smile, you know."

Startled, Hana jumped, but she quickly composed herself and zeroed in on what Tsubaki had just said. "He doesn't smile?"

"Mm-hmm. He's got the expressive range of a wax doll. Or a corpse."

Hana cocked her head. If anything, the Saku she knew had a rich array of expressions.

He always had a comical comeback ready when provoked. He had a razor-sharp tongue and cycled through the whole spectrum of human emotions.

Saku, suddenly bashful under Hana's careful scrutiny, averted his gaze and turned away.

"This guy?" Hana asked in confirmation.

Where were people looking to see a man who could react like Saku just did and think his facial muscles were dead?

Tsubaki beamed with pleasure. "Ee-hee-hee-hee. Take good care of my darling Master, Hana!" Then she disappeared again, leaving Hana wondering what she had come out to do in the first place.

Finally, the banquet came to a close.

Saku's mother and brother never made an appearance, which bothered Hana, but Saku was unruffled. If he was fine with it, there was nothing left for her to say. Besides, she had never been the type to overanalyze, so with a mental shrug, she pushed the matter to the back of her mind.

That evening, she was told that she would be sleeping in a different room than the one she had been using. She changed into her pajamas and let herself be guided to the new bedroom. She entered the room without questioning anything, perhaps assuming she was only being moved now that the ceremony was over. However, inside, she found

not one but two futon mattresses laid out neatly, side by side.

“Huh?” she uttered.

Hana was still standing in the room in bewilderment when who should come in but Saku.

“What’s wrong, Saku? Did you need something?” she asked.

“Not in particular. I’m here to sleep,” he answered breezily.

“What? Why?!”

She didn’t understand what he was saying.

No, it was more accurate to say that she didn’t want to understand.

“It’s our wedding night. Obviously, newlyweds should sleep together, don’t you think?” Saku said.

“No way! I didn’t hear about this,” Hana protested.

“Stop fussing. Come to bed already. Today was exhausting.”

She sat down on the futon, dazed.

Then he pulled her in by the hand, wrapped her up in his arms, and lay down.

“Whoa! Wh-what are you doing?” she cried.

“We’re married. This much should be fine,” he said. “Or are you implying you want more?”

With a sly grin, Saku pushed Hana over onto her back, hovering over her. She shook her head furiously, but he ignored her and stroked a hand down her cheek softly.

“Then permit me this,” he said, leaning in close.

The moment their lips were about to touch...

“We ain’t permitting you to do shit, you lecherous old fart.”

Aoi manifested right beside them and gave Saku a swift kick.

Saku took a splendid tumble off Hana. He sat up, the corner of his lips twitching. “I’ll give you ‘lecherous,’ but take ‘old’ back. I’m only twenty-four.”

“Sounds like a fossil to me.” Aoi laughed derogatorily.

Saku wasn’t about to let the insult go. “I see. Well, only a brat could be so immature.”

“What did you say, grandpa?”

Aoi glared at Saku, and Saku glared at him right back.

“Children should behave. This is a discussion between me and my wife,” Saku said.

“Master doesn’t want you touching her!” Aoi shouted.

“There are times when ‘no’ actually means ‘more.’ Remember that. Hana might be embarrassed, but she doesn’t actually hate it. Now, let’s go to sleep. Hana...” He turned from Aoi back to Hana, and what he saw made all the words fly right out of his mouth.

While he and Aoi had been arguing, Miyabi had procured two giant cushions from somewhere or other and was busy building a barricade between the two futons.

“See, Master, this way you can sleep easy,” Miyabi said with a satisfied smile.

“Smart, Miyabi,” Azuha complimented.

Aoi jumped in with two thumbs up and an enthusiastic “Good job!”

Saku grouched to Hana, “Aren’t your shikigami a little *too* overprotective?” He was dumbfounded.

“Hmm. They have a tendency to go overboard.”

She couldn’t deny the accusation.



The next morning, Hana woke up to find herself wrapped in Saku’s arms.

That was weird.

She definitely remembered Miyabi building a wall of cushions between the two of them the previous night. When she lifted her head to take a look, she realized Saku had crossed the barrier over to Hana’s futon instead.

Aoi should have been making a fuss in the face of such an audacious move, but he was nowhere to be seen.

And it wasn’t just Aoi. There were no signs of Miyabi or Azuha, either.

At least one of them had always been by her side whenever anything happened.

What was going on?

For the time being, Hana had to break free of Saku’s embrace. She twisted herself this way and that, but the more she struggled, the more his arms tightened around her. She was held captive.

She was so close to him that she could hear his heart beating. His body was a long line of heat against her. She blushed fiercely.

“S-Saku! Saku, wake up already!” she shrieked, slapping him.

Finally, Saku slowly roused and peeled open his eyes.

“Huh...Hana?” He spoke her name in a voice that was husky with sleep.

Hana had built up some immunity toward Saku, but any other regular high school girl would have gotten a nosebleed on the spot. He was exuding an entirely egregious amount of sex appeal.

“Let go of me,” she whined.

“Ah, okay.” Or so he said, but he didn’t move.

“Why are we sleeping together?” she asked. “And just how long are you planning on holding me for?”

“I like hugging you. It feels good,” he said.

Was it any wonder Hana’s face turned red after being told

something like that?

“Enough already. Get off me...”

At least let me spend my morning in peace, Hana thought.

At last, Saku loosened his grip. Hana was just about to wriggle free when something warm pressed against her cheek.

“Huh?” She turned to look at Saku with surprise.

He was smirking at her mischievously. “Should I have done it on the lips?”

“I-idiot!” Hana grabbed her pillow and swung it at Saku. “Aoi! Aoi!”

She called on her shikigami to knock the impudent man before her to the moon and back, but Aoi, who normally responded right away, failed to show.

Suspicious, Hana laid off her assault on Saku and said, “Aoi? Miyabi. Azuha.”

But it wasn’t just Aoi who had gone mysteriously missing. Neither Miyabi nor Azuha answered her, either.

“Why?” she muttered.

In contrast to Hana’s bewilderment, Saku was perfectly calm when he said, “They’re not coming.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” she asked.

“I put up a barrier to keep them out.”

“Excuse me?!”

Now that he had explained, she realized it was true. There was indeed a barrier centered around their room.

“They’re a disturbance. I can’t sleep in peace while they’re around.”

“What an unbelievable waste of energy...”

Maintaining a barrier while one slept was an extremely high-level technique. Only the cream of the crop among practitioners could successfully do it.

If asked, Hana would answer that yes, it was possible for her, too, but it wasn’t something she would do of her own volition.

Putting up a barrier was taxing because it required precise control. Plus, in Saku’s case, he already had to bear the burden of the protective barrier around the pillar.

The barrier around the room must have been using up a fair bit of his power, but the fact that he didn’t show any hint of strain was proof of how strong he was.

Whatever else could be said about him, at the end of the day, Saku was the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, and he lived up to his role as one of the country’s sentinels.

“Aren’t you tired?” Hana asked.

“Yeah, I am. They’ve been trying to break in all night,” Saku said.

“Sounds like them.”

Given Aoi’s personality, he wouldn’t have gone easy on the barrier

separating him from Hana. No doubt he had been attacking the obstacle with all his might.

“Take it down,” Hana said.

“Fine.”

The moment the barrier disappeared, Aoi, Miyabi, and Azuha manifested into the room.

“Master!” Aoi shouted.

“Are you unharmed, Master?!” Miyabi asked.

“Are you okay, Master?” Azuha added.

All three shikigami were relieved to see Hana safe and sound.

“I must apologize for leaving your side,” Miyabi said. “That barbarian didn’t do anything untoward to you, did he?”

“Who are you calling a barbarian, huh?” Saku shot back.

Miyabi, who was still fussing over Hana, didn’t seem to hear Saku protest. She checked Hana carefully from head to toe. “Your clothes are all in order. That’s a relief.”

“That’s not a guarantee that nothing happened,” Saku said, deliberately pouring gasoline onto the fire. His personality was just as bad as Hana’s.

As expected, his words roused Aoi and Miyabi’s ire.

“Hey, Master, can I kill him? I can kill him, right?” Aoi brandished his sword.

“Be my guest,” Miyabi said, giving him permission without waiting for Hana’s input.

The situation was touch and go, but Saku didn’t show an ounce of fear. He grinned boldly at Aoi. “Tsubaki, your sweetheart’s here to see you.”

The moment the words left Saku’s mouth, Tsubaki appeared, wearing her flouncy maid uniform as usual.

Uncertainty crossed Aoi’s face.

“Omigosh, no way! I get to see my precious darling first thing in the morning. I’m in heaven!” Tsubaki immediately pasted herself onto Aoi. There was little chance of separating them now. They were stuck together as if with superglue.

“Kn-knock it off,” Aoi said to Tsubaki. Then to Saku, he yelled, “That was cheap!”

Aoi and Tsubaki were equally strong by Hana’s estimate, so he wouldn’t be able to get rid of her so easily the way he did with minor shades. In fact, Aoi had no idea how to handle her at all.

And when in the world had he been promoted to darling?

“Darling, let’s go on a date next time! Just you and me, okay?” Tsubaki said.

“No way in hell!”

“You can’t say no. I’ve already decided. And leave your outfit to

me.” She puckered up and gave him a smack on his cheek.

Aoi screamed, “Gyaaaah!” and vanished.

“Geez, he’s so shy,” Tsubaki said, blushing. Her positivity was astounding to have drawn such a conclusion from Aoi’s reaction. It couldn’t be more obvious that he disliked her.

With the pest gone, Saku stretched and leisurely got to his feet. “Go change, Hana, and then we’ll eat breakfast.”

“Together?” Hana asked.

Saku had been constantly busy, so she had rarely seen him since moving into the Ichinomiya residence. Needless to say, she had been taking her meals alone in her room.

“Everything has calmed down for the moment. I’ll stay by your side from now on.”

“My beloved Master went around to all those pompous so-and-sos from the branches to persuade them to give you a chance, you know. That’s why he hasn’t been home,” Tsubaki explained.

Hana’s eyes widened. “He did?”

Saku flicked Tsubaki on the forehead. “Don’t say anything unnecessary.”

“But it’s true!” With those last words of protest, she disappeared.

“Hurry up and get ready,” Saku told Hana before hustling out of the room himself.

She caught a glimpse of his bashful expression before he left. Seeing him embarrassed made Hana feel antsy in turn.

“Master...” Miyabi wasn’t acting like her normal self. She looked forlorn, as if she were a lost child who had been forgotten by her parents.

Hana had an inkling of what was bothering Miyabi. “It’ll be okay,” she assured the shikigami. “Saku has a foul mouth, but he’s a good person at heart. He’s treated me with sincerity all this time.”

“Do you love that man, Master?” Miyabi asked.

“Who knows? I’ve only just met him. But even if I did fall in love with someone, I would never use that as a reason to abandon you and the others, and I would *never* date anyone who would dare ask me to leave you.”

“Master...”

Hana stroked Miyabi’s head gently.

Between the two of them, Miyabi looked physically older, but actually, she and Aoi had only been born a few years ago. If they had been human, they would be right at the age when parental figures were vital. Plus, because of Hana’s circumstances, Aoi and Miyabi didn’t interact with other people, so Hana was their entire world.

Well, that was no different from the relationship between most shikigami and their masters, but because human shikigami were

highly intelligent, they experienced a wealth of emotions just like people did. In comparison, as a butterfly, Azuha's mood fluctuated very little.

It was precisely because Miyabi had such a wide range of emotions that she also knew fear.

She was scared that Hana would leave.

Scared that Hana would no longer need her.

Miyabi's fear reminded Hana in a strange way of Hazuki.

"There's no need for you to worry," Hana reassured her. "Our marriage is nothing more than a contract, and once it's over, our relationship will end, too. This is only temporary."

"...I hope that's true," Miyabi murmured.

"What did you say?" Hana asked.

"No, it's nothing."

Hana didn't seem to have caught Miyabi's mutterings, which ultimately might have been for the best.

Miyabi alone had realized Hana would have to face the issue sooner or later whether she wanted to or not.

Hana changed out of her pajamas and exited the room to find Saku already waiting in the hallway.

"Thanks for waiting," she said.

"No problem."

When she told Saku that she had asked the servants to bring her meals to her room ever since she had moved in, he had scowled like he had bitten into something bitter.

Apparently, there was a room specially reserved for meals where every member of the family ate by unspoken rule.

Long story short, the fact that Hana ate alone in her own room meant she was neither accepted nor treated as part of the family.

Since she had always eaten by herself back in the Ichise house, she hadn't thought anything of it, but now that Saku mentioned it, it was strange to eat apart from the family you lived with.

Hana's family was an anomaly as always.

Saku apologized for the treatment, but to be honest, Hana hadn't minded. She didn't feel comfortable with the idea of eating with Saku's mother.

But Saku had informed the servants earlier, so from now on, she would surely have to take her meals in the dining room.

Whenever Hana thought about Saku's mother, her gut reaction was no thanks, she would rather be alone.

The two of them entered the dining room, a wide space at least the size of twenty tatami mats. Saku's mother was already seated in front of a low dining table.

“Good morning, Mother,” Saku greeted.

“Good morning,” she replied. She didn’t say a word to Hana or even glance Hana’s way.

Hana refused to let Saku’s mother’s attitude get to her and said, “Good morning.”

Saku’s mother turned a frosty gaze toward Hana. “Oh? You’re still here?” she said, throwing a jab at Hana right out of the gate.

Hana forced a smile onto her face.

Saku’s mother continued, “You have some nerve showing your face here. What are the Ichises teaching their children, I wonder? The older sister would at least be better-mannered...” She heaved an unpleasant sigh.

Hana had known this would happen. This was exactly why she wanted to avoid a confrontation with Saku’s mother.

She wanted to retreat to the safety of her own room so badly...

But she couldn’t run away in front of Saku.

For the foreseeable future, she would be living in this household.

“Hana, come sit next to me,” Saku said. The seat he indicated was higher ranked than the one his mother occupied.

Hana glanced at his mother and flinched at the hostility she saw there. She hesitated, but Saku took her hand and tugged her down next to him.

Right at that moment, a young man around Hana’s age entered the room. He had a head full of brown curls—dyed and permed, no doubt—that well suited his slight baby face and almond eyes. He was androgynous and shorter than Saku, but he still resembled his elder brother in some undefinable way.

When the newcomer saw Hana sitting next to Saku, he glared at her. “What the hell is *she* doing here?” he demanded in a low voice full of threat. His anger was visible in the line of his body.

Who is he? Hana wondered.

Before she asked out loud, Saku introduced them. “Hana, this is my younger brother, Nozomu. He’s a third-year at Obsidian High, same as you.”

“Don’t lump us together!” Nozomu yelled back. “Trash like her can live and die in Class C. We live in two completely different worlds!”

Wow, he hates me, Hana thought dispassionately. As far as she was concerned, his opinions had nothing to do with her.

She had anticipated the mother-and-son duo’s disapproval, seeing as they hadn’t shown up at the wedding. However, it was still exhausting to face their blatant vitriol.

“Nozomu, Hana is my wife, and I am the lord of this clan. You will speak to her with respect. That goes for you as well, Mother,” Saku said.

It was a godsend to have Saku as her steadfast ally.

"I won't accept it! What are you thinking, brother, taking this good-for-nothing wench into our family? Hazuki was an infinitely more suitable candidate! Why didn't you pick her instead?" Nozomu shouted.

The familiar way Nozomu had dropped Hazuki's name likely meant they were acquaintances.

Actually, Saku had said Nozomu was in the same grade at Obsidian High, so he could have been classmates with Hazuki in Class A.

"Because Hana is better than her older sister," Saku said simply.

"And I'm asking you why!"

"The sister is weak. She doesn't have the skills to be the lady of the Ichinomiya clan."

"This chick is infinitely worse!"

Then Nozomu switched targets to Hana, throwing her a dirty look.

"Hey, you. How'd you seduce my brother? With your body?" he sneered. "Sure is convenient being a woman, with all your tricks."

"Nozomu!" Saku admonished, but Nozomu didn't take back what he had said.

Azuha flew off her usual perch in Hana's hair to face Nozomu, unable to forgive him for what he had said.

Nozomu batted at Azuha with one hand in aggravation. "How useless. To think you can only produce one shitty bug! Hurry up and get out of here!"

Hana had been keeping her cool, but unable to take it any longer, she lunged forward, grabbed Nozomu by the collar, and dragged him into the hallway.

"Wait a minute," Saku said, following them in a panic.

"Let go!" Nozomu slapped away Hana's hand.

Hana took off one sock and threw it at Nozomu's face. The sock flew straight as an arrow. It hit his cheek dead-on and bounced off to plop down on the floor.

The hallway was silent.

Then Nozomu came to his senses and roared, "What the hell are you doing?!"

Hana puffed up her chest. "I'm challenging you to a duel." She removed her other sock and threw it at Nozomu, too, but he dodged.

"You're supposed to throw a glove. A glove," Saku said, providing comedic relief in the otherwise tense atmosphere. He had forgotten his anger in the face of Hana's actions.

"I didn't have a glove, so I had to make do with a sock, which is plenty good enough for a spoiled brat like him."

"Wh-what did you call me?!" Nozomu said.

"A brat! A man-child who only knows how to throw a tantrum and

judge others by his own broken ruler,” Hana said mercilessly. “Saku saw through Azuha’s camouflage right away, but you haven’t sensed a thing. That’s proof of how weak you are.”

“What the hell do you mean?!”

“I’ll show you. Let’s take this outside.” Hana turned around, shifting her gaze away from Nozomu to Saku standing behind them. He looked like he was having the time of his life. “Once I reveal my power, you’ll take care of the fallout for me, right, Saku?”

“Yeah, don’t worry. Go wild,” he responded.

“Roger that. I’m gonna kill you,” she said to Nozomu. “You’re going to have plenty of time to repent in the next world.”

She smacked one fist into her other palm, burning with purpose. Her gaze was steady as a rock.

She had suffered enough back talk from Nozomu. He had even had the nerve to insult Azuha, who was terribly precious to her. She couldn’t let the insult slide.

“...At least leave him half-alive for my sake. He is my little brother,” Saku said.

“Don’t wanna,” Hana whined.

“Don’t care. Please.”

Hana was disappointed, but she nodded reluctantly.

By that time, Nozomu was already shaking with anger. “Stop running your mouth. I accept your challenge, but if you lose, you leave this house.”

“Fine. In exchange, if *you* lose, you have to address me as Honored Sister,” Hana retorted.

“As if I’d lose!” Nozomu shouted.

With the negotiations complete, the two of them went out into the garden.

The news of the duel spread like wildfire through the household. Even the servants flocked outside to watch.

Don’t they have a little too much free time on their hands? Hana thought, but it worked out in her favor. The larger the audience, the better for her debut. The onlookers were all valuable witnesses on her behalf.

Saku’s mother was in the audience as well. Her expression was cold. She was clearly confident Nozomu would win.

That was the outcome all the servants were betting on as well.

Saku was the only exception.

“You pick the rules of the duel,” Nozomu ordered. The younger brother was just as impudent as the older.

Hana smirked. “Azuha, come here,” she commanded, holding out her index finger before her.

Azuha flittered over to Hana’s finger.

“You have a shikigami, too, right?” Hana asked.

“Of course. Guren!” A hawk appeared a moment after Nozomu gave his order and landed on his outstretched arm.

“Then we’ll pit our shikigami against each other. Any objections?”

“Are you seriously suggesting that?” He looked like he didn’t believe his ears.

That was natural enough.

To everyone else, Hana was proposing she would fight Nozomu with a mere butterfly, the weakest of all shikigami.

Hawks like Guren weren’t as rare as human shikigami, but as expected of Saku’s younger brother, his shikigami was palpably stronger than that of an average practitioner’s.

However, it paled before Azuha at full power.

“You don’t have to restrain yourself anymore, Azuha. You can speak in front of everyone, too,” Hana said.

“Really?” Azuha asked, and Hana nodded.

Azuha finally unleashed the strength she had been hiding all along, her beautiful rainbow wings growing ever more brilliant and vivid.

“Wha—...?” Nozomu stuttered, finally realizing the extent of Azuha’s true abilities.

His expression was one of pure shock. Saku’s mother looked equally flabbergasted.

“Shall we begin? I’m going to make you regret calling Azuha a shitty bug.” Hana grinned from ear to ear, looking practically chipper.

Nozomu schooled his expression following his initial surprise. His face soured in irritation. “A bug is a bug. I won’t be fooled by petty posturing. Go get it, Guren!”

His hawk spread its wings wide in response to his command and flew into the sky. It took aim at Azuha, who had flown off of Hana’s finger. It dived repeatedly at Azuha, but Azuha evaded its attacks with a dancer-like grace.

“Hurry up and finish it, Guren!”

After Guren had failed to take down Azuha after all this time, Nozomu’s irritation was at its peak. Guren could sense its master’s anger, and its movements grew sloppy as it scrambled to obey.

Hana saw her chance. “Azuha, enthrall,” she ordered.

Azuha circled around Guren, scattering a light dust of glittering scales that blinded the hawk.

What was the effect? A change came over Guren. Its eyes had been trained on Azuha this entire time, but now it twisted its head wildly. It was searching for Azuha, but Azuha was flying right next to it.

“What are you doing, Guren?!” Nozomu demanded.

“Azuha, finish it,” Hana said.

Azuha flew high above Guren and dispersed a murky smoke in her

wake. Enveloped by the fog, Guren faltered. The hawk was clearly in pain. Its movements grew jerky, until it couldn't fly anymore and crashed into the ground.

"Guren?!" Nozomu exclaimed.

"It's my win," Hana said.

The audience in the garden had just witnessed the unthinkable.

The shikigami of a son of the main Ichinomiya house had lost without landing a single scratch on a butterfly shikigami, whom everyone had scorned.

Nozomu was in a stupor. He couldn't believe his own eyes. He thought he must be dreaming, but there was no doubt as to the outcome: The good-for-nothing Hana and her shikigami were the victors of the duel.

In addition, anyone worth their salt could now sense the power pouring off Azuha.

The scene that played out before them was neither an illusion nor a dream.

But Nozomu had yet to acknowledge the reality of his loss. "I won't accept this. There's no way. A tramp like you is not suitable to be my brother's wife."

"Reality is harsh, didn't you know? Give up. I want to hear you call me Honored Sister," Hana said with a mocking laugh.

Nozomu glared daggers at her. "There's no way I could think that of a chick with zero sex appeal and who's flat as a board, moron!"

Silence rang out around the yard.

Hana's expression turned dour for a split second but then transformed completely.

Fury burned in her eyes. She focused her power into her hand and compressed it into a dense ball of energy. It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but any practitioner could sense it. Without warning, she pitched the energy she had gathered at Nozomu. "Die!"

"Don't kill him! Don't kill him!" a flustered Saku pleaded.

The ball of energy collided with Nozomu head-on and launched him into the air.

"Guh—" He gasped. His body hit the ground hard, and he stopped moving.

Saku and his mother both paled.

"Nozomu!" Saku's mother shrieked, running toward Nozomu's prone body. She checked his condition, but it appeared that he had only lost consciousness.

Hana, on the other hand, was completely refreshed. She had gotten her revenge and was feeling good.

She was enjoying herself when Saku bopped her on top of her head with his fist.

“Ow! What did you do that for, Saku?” she complained.

“You went too far,” he said.

“Weren’t you the one who said I could leave him half-alive?”

“Ohhh, that’s right.” He looked like he was eating his own words.

However, thanks to Hana’s stunt, the servants were looking at her with new eyes.



“Cripes, not this again,” the police officer said. He and his partner had come out here based on a tip from a neighborhood resident, but he wished he didn’t have to look at the scene before them.

“How many times is this?” his partner asked, frowning. She brought her hands together in a solemn prayer.

Recently, a string of animal killings had plagued the neighborhood, and the culprit was still on the loose. Whoever was behind the cruelty targeted secluded locations, so the police were having difficulty tracking them down.

This time, too, the butchered bodies of the dogs had been found in a small and unpopular park.

“I love dogs. I just can’t understand how someone could do such a thing,” the first officer said.

“I feel so sorry for them. Apparently, some were stolen right out of their own yards where they were leashed. We might even have been sent their missing dog posters,” the second one added.

The perpetrator was deliberately breaking into people’s homes to steal their pets.

Animals other than dogs had been found dead as well, but they hadn’t yet proved conclusively that all the crimes had been the work of the same person.

“I hope we catch this bastard soon.”

“I do, too.”

The officers finished cleaning up.

Once they had left the scene of the crime, a strange black phantom flickered into existence.

It whispered, “You poor, poor children. Come to me...”



Hana had missed breakfast because of the commotion with Nozomu. Lunchtime found her sitting with Saku in the dining room.

Saku’s mother entered, but the loudmouthed brat wasn’t with her.

“What about Nozomu?” Saku asked.

“He’s conscious, but he said he didn’t need to eat,” she answered.

“I see.”

Listening in on the conversation between mother and son, Hana rolled her eyes and muttered, “He must be sulking.”

Saku chopped her lightly on the head. “Don’t say that in front of Nozomu.”

“I know, I know,” Hana said. “You have to treat babies with tenderness and care, right?”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing I’m talking about!” Saku moved to chop her again, but this time she dodged.

Presently, a procession of servants came and brought their meals into the room.

Towa was among them. She was grinning as usual as she set a bowl in front of Hana. “Miss Hana, I heard you had a most busy morning. It is unfortunate that I was unable to attend the festivities.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll show you the video later,” Hana said.

“Hey! When did you take a video?” Saku asked, pursing his lips. That wasn’t the kind of comment he could ignore.

“Miyabi filmed everything with my phone for us to watch and have a laugh later.”

“I’m begging you, please get your shikigami under control.”

“Don’t wanna.” Hana shot down his plea with a bright grin.

Saku sank his head into his hands in despair. “Was everyone right after all? Did I make a mistake marrying you?”

“It’s too late for regret now. Miyabi, show me the video!”

These last words Hana directed at the empty air. All of a sudden, Miyabi manifested in the space and placed the phone by Hana’s hand. “Here you are, Master.”

Hana and Saku remained calm, but noise and chaos erupted around them. Fair enough. Surprise was the normal reaction when a person appeared out of thin air.

It wasn’t Saku’s shikigami who had materialized, either, but a stranger none of them had ever seen before.

“Er, uh, Miss Hana. Who might this be?” Towa asked hesitantly, casting sidelong glances at Miyabi.

“This is my shikigami, Miyabi,” Hana introduced.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Miyabi said. She sat down, tucking her legs elegantly under her in a perfect *seiza* pose, and bowed to Towa. Her every move was clean and beautiful.

“Well, well, well. My name is Towa.” Towa bowed in return.

Looking at the two of them with their heads lowered in deference to the other, one might have thought Miyabi had come to be married.

“You have a human shikigami?” a voice said.

At first, Hana didn't know who had asked the question, so she was slow to react. She soon pinpointed Saku's mother as the inquirer and rushed to answer. "Yes, that's correct."

"She's not the only one." The words accompanied Aoi's appearance. Saku's mother's gaze snapped toward him.

"This is Aoi. Azuha, Miyabi, and Aoi. They are my three shikigami," Hana explained.

The servants had all stopped what they were doing in favor of whispering among themselves. Saku's mother was at a loss for words.

"Three of them..."

"And two of them are human shikigami..."

Everyone was suitably shocked. No one could have imagined that Hana had so much talent as a practitioner.

"If you have this much power, why didn't you say anything?" Saku's mother finally said. "All the comparisons to your sister, all the mocking for you being weak, all of it would have stopped if you had brought out your shikigami sooner. You could have changed everyone's opinions of you in the blink of an eye."

"Oh, it was too annoying to bother," Hana responded.

"A-annoying...?" said Saku's mother, stunned again.

But Hana wanted to Saku's mother to understand there were people like Hana, too, people who thought the same way she did.

"Obviously, I knew the people who dismissed me as worthless, who called me Hazuki's scraps, would happily change their tune and shower me with praise the moment I revealed my true strength. But those kinds of compliments wouldn't have made me happy. Plus, I would've been expected to perform as a practitioner, which would've been a real pain."

"Then why did you disclose your powers now?"

"Because now I have Saku. He promised me he would deal with any trouble that resulted from me divulging my secret. Otherwise, I would've been content to stay as the good-for-nothing little sister."

"...I see."

By this point, Hana was starving, since she hadn't eaten any breakfast. She wanted to dig into the meal before her, but the heavy atmosphere made it awkward to eat.

Saku smiled mischievously at his mother. "Do you have any more objections to my marriage with Hana, Mother?"

His mother's words stuck in her throat. She averted her gaze, sullen. "...Not as such, no."

That was the first time Saku's mother had acknowledged Hana.

Saku was thrilled and tousled Hana's hair excitedly.

His mother observed the scene closely and muttered, "This may be the first time I have seen that expression on your face, Saku."

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You are so expressive in front of that girl. Even since you were a child, you have always been mature. No matter what happened, your face was always as stony as a rock.” She sighed quietly. “She has changed you.”

Saku opened his mouth to respond, but a loud rumbling growl interrupted him. Everyone looked at Hana’s stomach as one.

“...Can I eat now?” she asked with a broken laugh to hide her mortification. She cursed her stomach for not knowing how to read a room.

Towa’s laugh rang out around the hall, breaking the serious atmosphere. “Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh. It appears that Miss Hana’s stomach has reached its limit. Go on, go on. Young Master, Madam, please dig in as well.”

“Towa, you don’t need to address me as Madam anymore,” Saku’s mother said. “You should reserve the title for Saku’s wife, Hana.”

Towa smiled gently at Saku’s mother. “I understand, Miss Mio.”

That was the first time Hana heard Saku’s mother’s name.

That night, Hana and Saku were in their room—enclosed once again in a barrier that prevented the shikigami from coming in—when Saku apologized out of the blue. “I’m sorry about Nozomu’s behavior.”

“Children like him often throw temper tantrums. It doesn’t bother me,” Hana said.

“Tantrums, huh?” Saku chuckled. “What did you think of Nozomu’s abilities?”

“He’s nothing compared to you.”

She felt guilty comparing Nozomu to Saku, but that was the only way for her to evaluate him.

“Yeah, that’s precisely why no one protested me becoming the head of the clan,” Saku said.

That was proof of the wide gap between the two brothers’ skills. Nozomu may grow stronger in the future, but he was unlikely to reach Saku’s caliber. Hana had only just met him that morning, but she had sensed his limits right away.

“That makes him all the more pitiful,” Hana said, but Saku didn’t seem to understand. “It’s mentally draining to be compared to your exceptional older sibling all the time. Although, I’m sure if you had been in the same situation, you would still have come out of it full of confidence.”

“True.”

“His brash attitude toward others might just be a bluff he’s desperately maintaining.”

“You’ve really thought this through.”

“I’ve been compared to Hazuki all my life.”

Hana had wished for her parents’ support, but instead, they pitted her against Hazuki constantly, blaming her for her powerlessness every chance they got.

The wounds on her heart from that betrayal wouldn’t fade easily.

When she thought that Nozomu might have undergone a similar experience, she couldn’t help the pang of sympathy.

“Why does everyone and their mother feel the need to compare people...?” she asked.

Hana was Hana. Hazuki was Hazuki. But no one thought of them that way.

Hana just wanted to be seen for who she was—the most simple and ordinary of requests—but she wasn’t allowed even that much.

Well, there’s no point obsessing over it now, Hana was thinking, when without warning, Saku hugged her from behind.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing. You just looked lonely,” he answered.

“Oh, come on. You sure you don’t need your eyes checked?”

“That might be it...”

Hana grumbled, but she didn’t try to escape from Saku’s embrace.

If anything, it was just the opposite. She tucked herself into him, entrusting him with her weight.

In the silence that surrounded them, Hana found herself soothed by the warmth radiating from Saku’s body.

The next evening, Saku led Hana to a mysterious location far away from the main house. They were still on the Ichinomiya grounds, but they had walked a considerable distance. She was reminded anew of the palatial size of the residence.

The two of them stopped in front of a large boulder that was taller than Saku was.

Hana tugged on Saku’s sleeve. “Hey. Where are we? It’s the middle of the night. You didn’t even let me take the shikigami.”

“We have Mother’s blessing now, so it’s time for you to fulfill your duty,” Saku said.

“...Which was what again?”

Saku flicked her on the forehead before she had a chance to blink.

“Ouch!” she cried.

“You’re here to help repair the barrier.”

“Right, that was it.”

It wasn’t that Hana had forgotten, per se, but since there hadn’t been any mention of the barrier recently, she had shelved the matter in the back of her mind.

“This location is privy to only the head of the clan.”

Hana took a closer look at their surroundings and realized that what she had originally thought was one boulder was actually five placed in a circle at regular intervals.

Saku placed his palm on one, and the boulder began to glow with a blue light. A line of light shot out of the stone toward the other four boulders, tracing out a five-point star.

When the fifth and final boulder had been connected, the center of the boulder sank slowly into the ground, revealing a staircase leading down.

Hana's eyes were round with surprise.

Saku held a hand out toward her. "Take my hand and don't let go. Besides the clan lord, everyone else will be repelled. That's why you must hold on to me."

"O-okay." Hana grabbed Saku's hand, gripping it tightly.

They descended together into the gloom.

The staircase was lit by a supernatural blue glow that was neither fire nor electricity. It allowed them to see their surroundings. The stairs were narrow, and Hana's and Saku's shoulders brushed as they continued down side by side.

When they had been walking a short while, the stairs ended. They emerged into an open space, at the opposite end of which opened the mouth of a large tunnel.

Without hesitating, Saku pulled Hana forward by her hand. They passed through the tunnel, which led to another chamber. Standing in the middle of it was a pillar made of a clear, quartz-like crystal.

The crystal was the source of the blue light. The energy emanating from it was intense enough to make Hana's hair stand on end.

Around the pillar was a barrier that anyone could tell with a single glance was powerful. It had been put up to protect the crystal.

"Saku, could this be...?" Hana asked.

"This is one of the five crystal pillars that hold up our country. The Ichinomiya clan has been tasked with its protection since long, long ago."

A crystal that bore the fate of the country.

Every child born into a practitioner family was told the story as soon as they were old enough to learn about the world around them. The tale was repeated to them over and over again until they were sick to death of hearing it.

The pillars were the targets of the shades. A practitioner's job was to protect these crystals, indispensable as they were, at all costs.

Although the story was a common refrain, it was rare to hear it told by someone who had actually laid eyes on one of the pillars. Their locations were closely guarded secrets kept from the large majority of practitioners.

“Who would have thought it was lying beneath the Ichinomiya residence this whole time...?” Even with the crystal pillar standing right before her, Hana couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Only the clan head and the partner who will aid them know about this place. The only people who know besides me are my parents. You must not tell a soul. It is a secret even to Nozomu, my flesh-and-blood brother.”

Hana was too shocked to speak, but she nodded repeatedly.

Now she understood why they had left the shikigami behind. The pillar’s location was to be kept hidden from them as well.

“Look. Can you see? There are patches in the barrier where it’s damaged.” Saku pointed out a few spots.

When she had first laid eyes on the barrier, Hana had been impressed by its strength, but looking at it more closely, she could see that it was worn thin in places, as Saku had indicated.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Between generations, when the new clan lord begins feeding their energy into the barrier, the barrier decays as a backlash against the unfamiliar energy. When that happens, the power of the crystal leaks into the outside world. The shades inevitably pick up on the change and take the opportunity to double their attacks.”

“Ohhh.”

“The new head must saturate the barrier with their own power as quickly as possible and make it whole once more.”

“And for that, female yin energy is necessary, right?”

“Exactly.”

That was the precise reason why they had gotten married.

“What should I do?” she asked.

Saku smirked suggestively. Hana had a bad premonition.

“The barrier is maintained by the head of the clan’s power. Don’t you think it’s strange that a second person’s support would be needed?” Saku asked.

“Now that you mention it, I suppose.”

When the clan lord changed, the barrier became unstable because of the influx of unfamiliar energy. So it was a contradiction that two people were needed to provide the yin and yang energy to restore the barrier.

Logically, shouldn’t Hana’s power, which was different from Saku’s, weaken the barrier even further?

“A second person with a different energy would further weaken the barrier. However, my ancestors found a resolution to this contradiction. They found a way to merge two people’s energies.”

“How?”

“To be blunt, we have to consummate the marriage.”

“You said ‘in the old days,’ so is it different now?”

“Yeah. Practitioner techniques advance day by day. Besides, the person who acts as support isn’t always a spouse. Didn’t I tell you before that siblings can fulfill the role, too?”

“Oh, that’s right. I imagine the traditional method would have been a problem for a pair of siblings.”

“Precisely.”

Hana breathed a sigh of relief. She felt like a huge weight had lifted from her heart now that she was positive she wouldn’t have to sleep with Saku.

“I don’t know how to feel about you being so blatantly relieved...”

Hana chose to ignore Saku’s complicated expression. “So what do we do?” she asked instead.

“Have you ever transferred your power to someone else?” he asked.

“When my power first awakened, I siphoned some of it to Azuha. Will this be similar?”

“Yeah, that’s the general gist. Since you already have experience, this should go smoothly. Hold on to my hand and give me your energy, the same as you did back then.”

“That’s all?”

“I’ll convert your energy into my own and transfer it to the barrier. You won’t have to do anything else.”

“I’ve got it.”

Saku gripped Hana’s hand. With his free hand, he reached out and touched the protective barrier. “Ready. Now feed me your power. Go slowly to start.”

“Okay.”

Hana was nervous, but she tentatively sent some of her power to Saku. He jolted at the beginning, but they managed to establish a solid connection.

Hana didn’t know a thing about how Saku was transforming her energy, but it seemed to be taking a toll on him. His face was screwed tight.

“Increase the flow a bit,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Saku already looked like he was at his limit, but Hana obeyed and sent him more.

Bit by bit, her power flowed into him, and he channeled their combined power to the barrier.

How much time had passed?

Sweat dripped down Saku’s face, the proof of how exhausting the work was.

Hana couldn’t do anything besides continue feeding Saku her

energy.

But soon, she started to see the payoff of their hard work with her very eyes. Overall, the barrier was still patchy, but it was more solid than when she had first laid eyes on it.

Her face lit with pleasure, but she kept silent.

Saku finally took his hand off the barrier and collapsed to the ground.

Hana immediately drew back her power in alarm. "Are you okay, Saku?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. More importantly, are *you* okay? You must have expended a considerable amount of energy."

"Fit as a fiddle." Hana gave him two thumbs up, perfectly perky.

"You're even stronger than I thought."

His surprise at the depths of Hana's strength mingled with exhaustion on his face. After resting for a while, he was able to catch his breath.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked again.

"I'm worn out because this is the first time. Converting your energy while maintaining my focus on the barrier is more exhausting than I imagined, but it won't be a problem once I'm used to it. I want to do this every day if you're up for it."

"Got it. No problem."

Unlike Hana, Saku's face was lined with fatigue. He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Complicated feelings swirled within her as she watched him.

Although Hana had been born to a branch of the Ichinomiya clan, she hadn't had anything to do with the main family. Had her path not crossed with Saku's in the park, she wouldn't have been here, witnessing his efforts firsthand today. Had they not met, she would never have conceived that Saku was fighting so hard to protect the country behind the scenes.

Saku was still young, but he carried the fate of the nation on his shoulders.

He carried out his duty without a word of complaint to anyone despite the fetters of his responsibility.

With those thoughts running through her head, Hana reached out a hand instinctively to stroke Saku's head.

"What are you doing?" he said with a suspicious expression.

"Ummm, it's encouragement? Or a reward for a job well done?"

"Are you telling me or asking me?"

"You know, now that I've seen you, I'm starting to feel ashamed of myself," she admitted.

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?" he asked, confused. The sudden confession had thrown him for a loop.

"I've been hiding my powers ever since they awakened, right? I didn't want to get involved with anything annoying, and I didn't want to have anything to do with practitioners. I even ignored the shades as long as they didn't affect me directly. Not that I plan to change any of that now," she said. "But you, Saku, you've taken on such a heavy burden at your age. You pour blood, sweat, and tears into protecting the country. I respect you. I really do."

She had no choice but to face the truth of how much responsibility Saku carried after observing him.

"You have a strong sense of duty. You're not much older than me, but you have so much to oversee as the lord of the clan," she continued. "I'm worried for you. If you keep taking on more than you're obligated to, at some point, you're going to collapse. Being responsible is a praiseworthy trait, but you don't have to solve everything yourself. I want to help you however I can, just like today. I want to help carry your burden, if only to lighten your load a little... We're a, you know...a couple... Temporarily, at least."

Hana averted her gaze, embarrassed to be calling Saku and her a couple.

"..." Saku looked at Hana with astonishment.

"Saku?" Hana waved her hand in front of his dazed face.

All of a sudden, he caught her by the hand and pulled her into his chest.

"Eh—Saku?" she said.

"You're..."

"What? Saku? Hello. Yoo-hoo."

Hana couldn't see what kind of face Saku was making, wrapped up in his embrace, but she could somehow intuit his feelings from the strength with which he hugged her. She didn't resist and just let him hold her.

After a while, he let her go. The expression on his face was more peaceful and gentle than she had ever seen it, and she found herself unable to look away.

"You're a fool," he said in a voice overflowing with tenderness.

Hana didn't know what to say in response.

"You just blocked off your escape route with your own hands," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that you should be prepared."

Hana tilted her head, not understanding.

"We're going home, Hana," he said, his tone sweet when he called her name.

Chapter 4

Ever since Hana's duel with Nozomu, when she had shown her true strength, everyone around her started treating her differently. The servants no longer bad-mouthed her behind her back, and therefore Aoi was back in a good mood, too. Even Mio, Saku's mother, had stopped sniping at her. Her days were finally peaceful and quiet.

There was one exception. Nozomu, who had been thoroughly trounced by her in battle, scowled at her every time they met.

Lately, Hana had been eating in the dining room as was proper, taking all her meals with the other three members of the family. However, Nozomu never spoke to her on these occasions.

On Hana's part, she had yet to get over the fact that Nozomu had picked a fight with her. She responded to his attitude with smirks, deliberately fanning the flames. She got a kick out of seeing his body shake with suppressed anger while he pointedly ignored her.

Saku always karate chopped her when she went too far. Striking the right balance was key.

Then one day, Hana stumbled upon a peculiar scene.

Nozomu was sitting by himself in a secluded corner of the garden.

Curious what he was up to, Hana hid in the shadow of a building and watched him in secret.

"What do I do, Guren?" he mumbled, apparently in the middle of a conversation with his shikigami, a hawk named Guren.

"All I wanted to do was introduce myself to Saku's wife. You know my brother! You know how amazing he is, right? He's the youngest person ever to obtain his Fifth Color. He's strong and cool and smart and just perfect in every way, and I figured whoever he chose must be equally incredible.

"But then I found out he was marrying that good-for-nothing girl. I

was so sure there was a better match for him, and I opened my big fat mouth without thinking. I knew right then and there I'd messed up, but it was already too late.

"I want to apologize, but how could I after all this time? I said such awful things. What should I do? Does Saku hate me? What if he says he doesn't need a little brother like me...? Guren, what do I do?! I might as well die if he hates me!"

Hana slipped away without making a sound. "I feel like I just saw something I shouldn't have..."

She was walking down the hallway, arms crossed, agonizing over what she just witnessed, when Mio came along and stopped her.

"Is something wrong, Hana?"

"Oh, Saku's mother. No, it's nothing. I wouldn't dream of troubling you about it."

I just discovered your son has a serious brother complex! ...was not a line she would be saying out loud anytime soon.

"Won't you stop that?" Mio asked.

"That?" Hana tilted her head. She had not the slightest idea of what was being asked of her.

"Stop calling me Saku's mother. I'm not just his mother; I'm yours, too, so please address me as such." Mio turned and scampered off, her cheeks tinged a light pink.

First Nozomu, now Mio. What was with everyone today...?

"Hey, Saku, is tsundere part of your family's initial character settings?" Hana asked Saku, who happened to be passing by that very moment.

Saku eyed her suspiciously. "What are you going on about now?"



"Wh-what the hell is this?! Where did it come from?!"

"Your judgment day has come."

"Eek— It spoke..."

The black shadow rippled forward. Like a hunter stalking down its prey, it closed the distance and attacked.

"AAIIIEE!!"

A hush fell over the scene. The corpse, condemned to a permanent silence, dropped to the floor.

"One down."

Somewhere, in an apartment building, in the gloomy darkness of a room once inhabited, the hunter vanished without a sound.



The days following the wedding were a chaotic whirlwind, but finally, the day came when Hana could return to school.

Hana had always commuted on foot and fully intended to do so that morning, too. However, Mio found out about Hana's plans and scolded her. The lady of the Ichinomiya clan could not possibly *walk* to school. She was ordered to take the car.

So for the first time in Hana's life, she was chauffeured to class.

There were students at Obsidian High who belonged to branch families of the Ichinomiya clan and had therefore attended Saku and Hana's wedding. They had circulated tales about the ceremony to the rest of the school.

Hana had always had a reputation as Hazuki's talentless younger sister, but previously, she still enjoyed a modicum of anonymity. Now, even students who had never known she existed were well aware of who she was.

When she stepped onto the school grounds, she immediately found herself in a storm of razor-sharp glares.

"Is *she* seriously the one?"

"Surely it's a joke, no? She's the one people call Hazuki's scraps."

"But the branch families' kids went to the wedding."

"Well, if the rumors are true, then the Ichinomiya clan is finished. I can't believe they took trash like her into the main family."

The poisonous whispers made Hana feel ill. However, she had always been the target of other people's scorn, and while the insults themselves might have changed, ultimately, it was the same harassment she was used to. When she reframed the taunting, she felt better.

"'A rumor only lasts seventy-five days.' That's what they say, right?" Hana headed up to her classroom, ignoring her surroundings.

When she entered the room, she was ambushed by Suzu right away. "Hana, what's going on?! What happened? When in the world did you start dating the lord of the Ichinomiya clan?! I didn't hear anything about it!"

The usual warm and fluffy atmosphere around Suzu was gone. Suzu's eyes gleamed dangerously like those of a hunter. It was a little terrifying...

"Calm down, Suzu," Hana said.

But her words failed to extinguish the flames of Suzu's excitement.

"There's no way I could possibly calm down! Hana, *that* Hana has become the bride of some stranger. What's more, you didn't say a single word to me, your best friend! When I got a boyfriend, I reported to you at once."

Hana was momentarily distracted, wondering which Hana *that* Hana was, but she didn't pursue the issue. "Y-yeah. I feel guilty about that,

too, but I didn't have time to talk to you...," she eventually said.

"Tell me what happened!" Suzu demanded.

"Okay..."

Hana set her bag down on her desk and began to explain.

Her other classmates were pretending they weren't looking, but Hana could tell they were all eagerly listening in. In reality, they probably wanted to interrogate Hana exactly the way Suzu was doing.

In any case, Hana had deliberately chosen the classroom as her stage to tell her story. Rather than answering the same questions over and over again, she preferred the spectators.

Hana didn't say a word about the contract between her and Saku. Instead, she told Suzu she had met Saku in the park, and the next day, he had passionately proposed to her. The terms he had proposed were too good to pass up, so she accepted.

She thought she might have cut the story down too much, but her version was bound to be short, seeing as she couldn't talk about anything relating to the crystal.

However, by the time Hana finished, Suzu's eyes were sparkling with excitement. She had drawn her own conclusions about Hana and Saku's relationship. "You're telling me that he fell in love with you at first sight?"

"Love at...? Er, sure, I guess?"

He had fallen in love, all right, but it was with Hana's talent.

"Oh my gosh, how romantic!" Suzu gushed. "And you must've been so relieved when his family approved of the marriage."

"Well, his mother was against it at first, but she's come around since then. It was out of the blue, so I can sympathize with her feelings. I'm just glad she's finally accepted me."

"He wanted to make you his wife so desperately, he was even willing to go against his family." Suzu's expression was rapt and dreamy. She was lost in her own fantasy.

Sadly to say, Hana and Saku's relationship was no more than one of business.

Nevertheless, now that news of their marriage had spread far and wide, what was going to happen when they got divorced?

The divorce was inevitably going to make waves, but Hana was also worried about Saku's thoughts on the matter.

What's more, Hana's retelling had provided a new, juicy piece of gossip for the rumor mill.

Bizarre. Hana genuinely didn't understand how things had turned out this way.

All she had wanted to do was make it clear that her relationship with Saku was one of convenience, but because she had been obligated to hide so much of the details, somehow the story became

that Saku had fallen madly in love with her and had whisked her away into a marriage of passionate love.

If word of this got out, Saku was going to be mad at her.

Perhaps she had made the wrong decision telling Suzu in the middle of the classroom after all, but it was too late for regrets. Her classmates had heard her account loud and clear.

The girls who lived for drama were thrilled the way Suzu was. Hana even overheard someone call her a modern-day Cinderella. *That's wrong!* she wanted to protest.

"Hey, Suzu, I think you might have misunderstood something. Saku and I met the way we did, but we only got married because it was beneficial for the family. It's not like we're in love or anything," Hana insisted.

If she didn't clarify right away, she would end up being cast as the pitiful woman Saku threw away when they finally divorced. This was a matter of life and death.

But the mistake had already been made, and it had taken on a life of its own.

"Don't worry, Hana. I understand you perfectly," Suzu reassured her. "You have to say that. Otherwise, you'd have to deal with all the girls being jealous of you."

"Huh? No, no, no, you're wrong, Suzu," Hana protested.

"Oh please, Hana. You shouldn't care about what other people think. You're already his wife, so hold your head up high."

"You've got it all wrong, I said!"

"Shh. It's okay. I know, I know."

Suzu grinned at Hana sunnily, despite the fact that they were on two completely different pages. But now that Suzu's mind was made up, Hana was powerless to change it.

Their back-and-forth was interrupted by the teacher's entrance. All throughout class, Hana struggled to come up with a way to explain.

In the end, she couldn't clear up the misunderstanding between classes. By the time lunch rolled around, the word that Saku had fallen in love with her at first sight had spread all throughout the school.

Somehow, the story had been twisted even further. The latest version painted Saku and Hana as star-crossed lovers who had gotten married despite opposition from both families over Hana's lack of ability. People were saying they were like Romeo and Juliet.

"No, no, things always get blown out of proportion in a game of telephone," she protested.

As Hana headed toward the cafeteria, students she had never once interacted with stopped to tell her, "I'm rooting for you," while wiping tears away from the corners of their eyes. She could only cover her

face with her hands in despair.

Saku was going to be furious with her.

These rumors were going to make it difficult for them to divorce later.

“What do I do...?” she muttered.

The fictional tale followed her wherever she went. A tragedy with a happy ending. Instead of resenting Hana for wheedling her way into a marriage with the lord of the Ichinomiya clan, the student body was reveling in it.

Everyone loved a good Cinderella story no matter the time period.

If Hana’s story had followed Cinderella’s plotline, she should have been thrown into the raging storm of jealousy from all the other women aiming for Saku. However, the pinch of tragedy thrown into the mix had sparked a chemical reaction that she could not have foreseen.

She found herself actually turned off by everyone’s reactions.

Later, Hana was walking down the hall with Suzu.

“Hmm.” She was deep in thought, her arms folded.

“Are you worried about something, Hana?” Suzu asked.

“A little.”

A group of three girls from Class A blocked their way. Hana had seen them hanging out with Hazuki before. If she remembered correctly, they were all daughters of Ichinomiya branch families.

“What?” Hana asked them.

“How about you know your place?” one sneered.

“Enlighten me about this: Don’t you feel ashamed using the Ichinomiya name for your own gain?” her friend demanded.

The girls were blatant about their contempt for her.

A sudden urge to cry and hold on to someone washed over her, to escape into the arms of that invaluable person who would react exactly the way she needed.

Anyway, since the three were all part of the Ichinomiya clan, they must have had their sights set on Saku themselves. Their hostility was predictable. Never in their wildest dreams would they have expected to be discarded in favor of the infamously talentless Hana. Had Hazuki been the one chosen, they would have accepted it.

They glared at Hana with hatred in their eyes and shouted down at her.

“I don’t care what weird rumors are floating around; there is no way Lord Ichinomiya is in love with you!”

“That’s right. There must be some other reason.”

The one who argued against their derisive comments wasn’t Hana but Suzu. “You’re wrong! Lord Ichinomiya loves Hana!” she yelled, her face red with anger.

Hana cherished Suzu as her dear friend and a genuinely kind person, but unfortunately, the three dissenters had it right.

“No one asked you. Third parties should mind their own business!” one of the girls yelled.

“You’re all third parties, too!” Suzu shouted.

“Hold on, Suzu...,” Hana said, flustered by Suzu’s uncharacteristically combative behavior.

“Don’t be jealous just because Lord Ichinomiya didn’t pick you!”

Suzu’s words hit a sore spot in the three girls.

One of them was practically seething. Her face was flushed, and her shoulders were heaving. Without warning, she shoved Suzu hard, sending her flying.

“Suzu!” Hana cried, running over to check on Suzu where she had fallen down in the hallway. “Suzu, are you okay?”

“Yeah...,” Suzu said.

Hana was relieved that Suzu had no visible injuries. However, Suzu was massaging her arm as if it was in pain. Hana couldn’t let the attack go unpunished.

She turned a frosty glare onto the three girls and stalked toward them menacingly.

The girl who had shoved Suzu shrank back, but unwilling to admit defeat, she feigned bravado instead. “Wh-what?”

“Apologize to Suzu,” Hana demanded, keeping the smoldering fury within her in check.

The other girl reacted with disdain. “Excuse me?! Why in the world would I do that?”

“You’re the one who pushed her, so obviously, you should apologize.”

“She stuck her nose in where it didn’t belong. She only has herself to blame. I have nothing to be sorry for,” the girl insisted.

Hana stared at her coldly. “I see. If that’s how you want to play it, fine. Best be prepared, then.”

“Prepared for what?”

Hana’s lips twisted upward in a nasty grin. “You’re part of an Ichinomiya branch family, no? In that case, all I have to do is report you to Saku. I’ll make sure to include the fact that you deliberately insulted and defied the lady of the clan. That’s me, of course. I can’t wait to see what he’ll do to you.”

The girls’ faces drained of color.

“Wha—?!”

“Coward!”

Hana laughed inwardly at their agitation and continued, “What are you panicking for? Weren’t you the ones insisting that Saku doesn’t love me? If you don’t believe he’d listen to someone like me, then you

should be looking forward to his reaction.”

After spitting out those final words, she grabbed Suzu’s hand and left.

She felt as if she had said her piece and run away, but there was no reason for her to stick around and argue with them any further.

“Hana, is it all right that you said all that?” Suzu asked, worried that Hana would get in trouble for invoking Saku’s name capriciously.

To the branch families, the lord of the clan was a divine being who lived in the heavens, and they avoided bothering him with anything beneath his notice.

But Hana didn’t care about any of that.

That divine being was Saku, after all. In the few days they had been together, she had come to understand that Saku wasn’t so narrow-minded that he would be offended at every little detail.

She never had to walk on eggshells around Saku. In fact, it was just the opposite. She felt comfortable with him, like she could tell him everything, and vice versa.

In all honesty, she might have been closer to Saku than to her own family.

And because he was so magnanimous, she had no qualms about pushing her troubles onto him.

“Don’t sweat it,” Hana said to Suzu. “I expected this kind of derision from the start. Saku will take care of it. I’m just borrowing his authority for a time.”

Once word got around that anyone who laid a hand on Hana would have to answer to Lord Ichinomiya, all the petty insults and bullying should stop.

From that perspective, it might have actually benefited Hana for the *Romeo and Juliet* retelling to circulate around the school.

Saku was the one who had said they should get married to begin with, so it was only right that he put in the work to provide Hana with a peaceful life.

Hana’s goal was an easy and luxurious retirement.

“I see. You really are loved. I’m so happy we can swap love stories now!” Suzu said with a pure smile.

Hana felt a pang of guilt. Unfortunately, she and Saku weren’t that kind of couple. She glossed over her relationship with Saku and pressed Suzu for her stories instead.

“I’m going to the shopping center with Yuu for our next date. He invited me, and...”

While Suzu waxed poetic about her boyfriend, Hana listened attentively with a smile.



At the same time that Hana was fighting rumors at school, Saku was paying a visit to a certain apartment for work.

At the entrance of the building complex, there were police controlling the traffic. Saku only had to flash his obsidian pendant, and they let him right in.

As soon as he stepped into the apartment, his nose was assaulted by the overwhelming stench of iron.

Past the entrance, the room was awash with a sea of blood.

Even the walls and ceiling were splattered with drops of crimson blood shading to black. The floor was so bloody that it was difficult to find a clean place to step.

The police officer stationed in the room spotted Saku and walked over. "Thank you for coming, Lord Ichinomiya."

"This isn't your average case, is it?" Saku asked.

"No."

Saku was far from a police officer, but he had been called out for one purpose.

Once in a while, when science failed to uncover the answers to a case, the police called the practitioners in to consult. On those occasions, a gag order was issued for everyone involved.

First, the Association sent its initial responders to determine whether the case required a practitioner's expertise.

The mass media fell under the umbrella of the five clans, so in the case that practitioners, not policemen, were needed to solve the case, it was easy to restrict the dissemination of information.

"Let's see the body," Saku said.

A blue sheet had been spread out in the center of the room. The officer obeyed Saku and lifted it up, revealing the brutalized corpse of a young man, his body left where it had initially been found.

"The victim died of blood loss. The cause of death appears to be the wound on his neck," the officer explained.

"His arms and legs are missing," Saku commented dispassionately.

As a Fifth Color practitioner, he had been to his fair share of crime scenes. He didn't bat an eye at the sight of the grisly corpse. He scanned the body with a pragmatic gaze for anything out of the ordinary.

The officer furrowed his brow and recited the facts of the case as he knew them. "The wound on his neck appears to be a bite wound. The marks on his limbs indicate that they have been bitten off as well. However, the victim didn't own any pets. Moreover, it's hard to imagine any animal big enough to tear off a man's arms and legs roaming around the city."

"I see," Saku replied curtly.

He squatted down next to the victim to take a closer look. What he

was most interested in were the bite marks. “There’s a sinister energy around the wounds. It’s highly concentrated. But this doesn’t quite feel like the work of shades, either.”

“Do you mean that this case falls under practitioners’ jurisdiction?”

“Yes, it appears so. It seems like it’ll turn out to be quite an annoying one, too. The first responders likely drew the same conclusion, seeing as they purposefully summoned me despite my busy schedule.” He tsked.

What timing. To think that an incident serious enough to require a Fifth Color practitioner would occur while the barrier around the pillar was still incomplete.

Saku wanted to push the case onto someone else to prioritize his work on the barrier, but there were precious few practitioners of Obsidian rank. All the others had their hands full with their own cases. In the end, the only one in the region available was Saku himself.

Foisting the work recklessly onto a lower-ranked practitioner could cause more harm than good. Saku had no choice but to work the case himself.

With no other option, he took on the investigation.

Only a few days passed before a second incident occurred.

A body torn apart by a beast had been discovered in a park.

This time, there was a witness.

The victim had been drinking with his friend when they were attacked.

Saku wasted no time heading over to interrogate the witness. During the interview, the man was quaking with fear. It was no wonder. He had seen his friend killed before his very eyes and was in a state of shock.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Saku asked as gently as he could. The man was badly frightened.

“A-a monster...,” the man stuttered out, his face bleached of color and his body shaking.

“A monster? What kind?”

“We were drinking in the park when that—that *thing* came for us. It was nine...no, ten feet tall. A humongous dog. But there’s no way there could be a dog that big. I was stunned when it appeared. Then it attacked us.” The man’s words died in his throat. He sat quivering with his lips pressed tight together.

Saku decided it would be useless to ask the man anything further and made to leave. However, the man suddenly grabbed Saku. He clung to Saku desperately and cried, “Save me, please! It’s going to kill me next! It said so!”

“What do you mean?” Saku asked.

"The monster threatened me. 'Two down, two to go. You're next.' That's what it said... How could this have happened? Right after that idiot Hayase had gotten himself killed, too."

"What did you say?"

The witness had just said something Saku couldn't ignore.

Hayase was the name of the victim who had been discovered dead in his apartment a few days ago.

"You knew him?!" Saku demanded wildly, grabbing the man's shoulders.

The man cringed back in fear and nodded. "Y-yeah. We hung out together."

Victims one and two had died by the same type of wounds, and the third target had already been warned.

Furthermore, all three men knew each other.

"The killings aren't random...," he muttered to himself. The perpetrator planned to take the lives of two more people, one of which was the man in front of Saku. "But what's the motive?"

There must have been some kind of reason, some commonality among the targets.

Saku also had to track down the fourth and last target, but when he asked the witness for clues, all he got back in response was the refrain "I don't know, I don't know" on repeat. He gave up on asking further.

He assigned Tsubaki to guard the man and headed to the last crime scene, the park. There, he was met with an atmosphere of resentment so visceral that it made him wince.

The murder of one person could not result in such a thick cloud of malice.

Entrance to the park was prohibited, but there were several officers still on the premises. Saku called over to one of them. "Can you answer a question for me?"

"What is it?" the officer asked.

"Other than the latest incident, has there been any other trouble in this park lately?"

"Besides this one?" He thought about Saku's inquiry with a quizzical expression.

While he was thinking, a second officer interjected, having recalled something of possible interest. "If I remember right, didn't they find the dogs here? The ones that were killed?"

A light bulb went off in the first officer's head. "Right, right. That was this park."

"What was the case?" Saku asked.

"A large number of dog bodies were discovered in this park a short time back," he recited. "They were all covered with visible wounds, so the police have been investigating it under the assumption that a

person was behind the killings. I think it even made the news. A number of similar incidents have happened in this neighborhood recently.”

“I see. Thank you for the info.”

“Happy to be of service.”

The officers bowed.

Saku left the park and headed back to the Ichinomiya residence. He was in the middle of compiling the information collected by other practitioners when Tsubaki returned, battered and badly injured.

He immediately rushed to her side. “Are you all right, Tsubaki? What happened?”

“Ugh. I’m sorry, Master. I—I lost.”

“What happened to the man you were guarding?”

“He’s alive. But you have to send someone else to protect him before...it comes back...” Tsubaki faltered and then collapsed, disappearing where she lay.

Shikigami could regenerate themselves over and over as long as their master was alive. However, if they depleted so much of their energy that they were no longer able to maintain their form, they needed time to recover. Tsubaki wouldn’t be able to return to duty anytime soon.

Saku hadn’t anticipated that the perpetrator would be strong enough to take down Tsubaki. Such a powerful entity could not be allowed to roam freely for long.

“Time is the enemy,” Saku muttered.

He made a few calls without delay to arrange for Tsubaki’s replacement. One practitioner wouldn’t be enough. He was able to mobilize several with considerable skills.

Then he called for a servant. “Bring Hana to me,” he commanded.

“Understood, Master.”

He didn’t have to wait long before Hana came to the room. Azuha was with her, riding in her hair as usual.

Hana was still keeping a restraint on her power, but anyone who took a proper look should have realized immediately her overwhelming strength.

She had enough raw talent to dazzle even Saku.

It was unbelievable that she had been able to hide it all this time. Was her success due to a talent in keeping secrets or because she had been surrounded by incompetents? Saku suspected the reason was a mixture of both.

However, Hana’s brother, Yanagi, held the record for being the youngest practitioner to obtain the Lapis rank, a record Saku himself hadn’t been able to beat. Nevertheless, Yanagi hadn’t noticed, either.

Saku wanted to demand how that could possibly be.

Granted, Yanagi rarely returned home, so perhaps it wasn't too far-fetched.

In any case, Saku hardly had any right to complain. He, too, had continuously pushed work onto Yanagi.

His current frustration certainly wasn't because he was bitter about not winning the record for youngest Lapis rank holder. Poppycock.

"You asked for me, Saku?" Hana asked.

"Yeah, I have to talk to you about something."

He waited for Hana to sit down across from him before continuing. He outlined the two recent murders and explained that the culprit likely wasn't human and that furthermore, normal, everyday people were the targets.

"I still have the barrier repair to consider, so I want to wrap up this case as soon as possible," he said. "For that, I need your—"

"No," Hana refused bluntly before Saku had even finished.

A momentary hush fell over the room.

Saku chanted *Keep cool* over and over in his head as he said, "With your powers, you could settle the case in an instant."

"I said no."

Refused a second time, Saku reached the limits of his patience. "You were the one who told me you'd help me out wherever you could!"

"Did I say that?" Hana said, feigning ignorance.

The vein in Saku's temple pulsed. Looking at the Hana who appeared to have completely forgotten their previous conversation, he wanted to demand back the emotions he had wasted on her.

Her words had meant so little to her that she had already forgotten them.

But they had made Saku happy.

Saku vastly overshadowed the average practitioner. While there were people he could depend on, there had never been anyone in the past who had told him he could depend on them.

Everyone respected him, but no one worried for him. No one, except for Hana.

And yet...

Saku finally understood the meaning of the phrase "The greatest hate springs from the greatest love."

"What if I add it into the contract?" he threw out.

"Add what?" Hana asked.

"If you solve the case, I'll throw in a villa with an ocean view."

Hana's attitude turned around on its head. Her eyes sparkling, she said, "It would be my pleasure to assist you!"

"Bring your copy of the contract later. I'll write in the amendment."

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

That was how Saku got Hana to promise to help.



Hypnotized by the vision of an oceanside villa, Hana had agreed to Saku's request for her help before she stopped to think. Her impulsivity had earned her Aoi's wrath after the fact, but nonetheless, when she saw the newly inked clause on the bottom of the contract, she was over the moon.

"This should be good enough," Saku said, handing the document over.

"Thanks!"

Hana skimmed it and folded it back up. She didn't know yet whether she would regret her decision later on.

Saku dragged Hana out of the house ostensibly for investigative purposes.

It was a school day, but Saku had told her homeroom teacher she would be accompanying him on official practitioner business, so she had been granted the day off.

As to what the investigation actually entailed, it mostly involved the two of them prowling around town.

Hana may have been strong, but she had never had hands-on experience with a case before. She trailed behind Saku without understanding anything that was going on.

When she grew tired, she finally asked Saku, "Hey, what are we doing? What happened to the investigation?"

"We're in the middle of it right now."

"How so?"

As far as Hana could tell, they had merely been taking a stroll.

"You haven't noticed?" Saku asked.

"Noticed what?" Hana genuinely didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

He looked at her disparagingly. "I grant you that you can kill a shade without breaking a sweat, but your skills are unbalanced. Seeing as you've never worked as a practitioner before, it is what it is."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Saku sighed and brought out his phone to show Hana a map of the neighborhood.

"Here is the first crime scene, and here's the second," he explained patiently, pointing out the locations on the map. "And here is where the mutilated animal bodies were discovered."

"They're all nearby. Oh, could it be...?" Hana called to mind the places they had gone to that morning and finally realized what Saku

was getting at. “We passed through all of these earlier?”

“That’s right. You might not have noticed, but all the locations contained traces of the same energy, a malignant hatred and resentment that must’ve been born from the animals that were killed. When animosity is allowed to fester in one place, the souls can’t move on. Exposed to power, they’ll inevitably turn into shades.”

“Shades spawn from the deep negative emotions of living things, right? I learned that much in school.” Hana gazed at him coolly, daring him to belittle her again.

“Yet you didn’t notice a thing. Anyway, never mind that. The places we visited had all at one point been saturated with enough resentment to give birth to shades, but we didn’t encounter a single one.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Hana fielded attacks from shades on the regular, but even though the two of them had been going around to places with strong negative energy, places shades were attracted to, they hadn’t seen any.

“I could sense the feelings of hatred, but they had already mostly faded. It was like a lingering scent in the air. In that case, where did they go? That’s the issue at hand. I also noticed a trace of malignant energy at the dumping site of the animals, the same energy I had felt around the two victims.”

Hana hadn’t sensed anything of the sort. She cocked her head in question.

“...Are you going to class properly?” Saku asked, exasperated.

“Well, it’s not like I want to be a practitioner,” she answered.

“What do you usually do in class?”

“Sleep.”

The word was hardly out of Hana’s mouth before Saku delivered a swift chop to her head.

“Make sure you pay attention from now on,” he ordered.

“Okay, okay. More importantly, back to the case.”

Saku sighed deeply and composed himself. “Let’s head to the next location.”

“There’s *more*?” Hana was tired of walking around.

“Just one more,” he said, striding off, pulling her with him by the hand.

Their destination ended up being a run-of-the-mill parking lot.

“We’re here?” Hana asked when they arrived.

“Yeah. Listen to me. Take a good look around and see if you can feel anything unusual. You deal with shades all the time. I have faith that you can sense the flow of energy.”

Hana did as she was told and observed their surroundings carefully.

Her every nerve was on high alert for signs—even ones that were invisible to the naked eye—of contamination, malignant energy, or

anything inhuman.

She didn't understand what she was looking for at first, but once she grounded herself and focused, really focused, she was able to pick up on the irregularities Saku was talking about.

She could sense a hint of resentment so extreme that it made a shiver run down her spine. So intense were the feelings of rage and rancor that she could almost hear the tortured screams.

But the feeling was already a shadow of its former self, as if it would disappear any moment.

"I got it. I can sense it somehow," Hana said.

"I knew you had good instincts," Saku responded.

"I'm always on the lookout for shades, so I'm sensitive to their energies. But this feels a little different."

"It hasn't turned into a shade yet. Can you discern that faint trace of something else?"

Hana focused once again.

There was a sinister energy that was both different from and far more powerful than the emotions of the animals. It was similar to but not the same as the energy shades gave off. She had never felt anything like it before.

"There's something I can't put a finger on... What is it?" she asked.

"I felt the same animosity coming off the wounds of the two victims. The source of that malignancy is our culprit."

"You said the attacker is a dog, right? One that can talk?" Hana asked in confirmation.

"Yeah."

She had never heard of a shade that could speak before.

Shades were manifestations of condensed negative energy. They had no identities or desires of their own. They merely projected hatred indiscriminately out toward the world and had an instinctive appetite for power.

However, the victims in the case they were working had been singled out and attacked for a specific motive, so it was unlikely that the incidents were caused by shades.

Hana thought that Saku already had a suspect in mind.

"If it's not a shade, what do you think it is?" she asked him.

"An entity with will... Perhaps a curse of some sort," he proposed.

"If that's the case, I won't be able to help, you know?"

Curses needed to be countered, but if the counter was performed poorly, the curse could backlash onto the practitioner. For that reason, curses were considered too dangerous to teach in school. Only Third Color practitioners and above were taught how to deal with them.

Saku would know how to handle them, seeing as he had his Obsidian rank, but Hana was still a student. The only thing she knew

about curses was that they existed.

"I'm aware of that," Saku said. "If my theory ends up being right, you won't have to do anything. In fact, you had best not even try."

Hana was relieved to hear that, but she was still uneasy.

The two of them hung around the scene for a while longer, but when they failed to find anything of interest, they decided to leave.

"Sakuuu, I'm hungry," Hana complained.

"Hmm, all right. We'll take a break," Saku said.

There was a shopping center nearby where they could hopefully find a bite to eat.

"Ah, I need to use the bathroom real quick," she said.

"Fine, but hurry up."

"Will do."

When Hana came out of the restroom, she found Saku being hit on by two women.

"Whoops," Hana mumbled, stopping in her tracks and retreating into a corner to spy on the situation.

"Come on, what do you have to lose?" one of the women said coaxingly.

"Have a quick lunch with us," her friend urged.

Both women overflowed with confidence, and they continued to flirt outrageously with Saku. They were carnivores, and Saku was their intended prey.

Should Hana step in? Nope. It was impossible for her.

Hana decided to wait and observe the situation. She could tell from Saku's expression that his mood was rapidly deteriorating.

However, his glower did nothing to detract from his good looks. If anything, the smolder in his eyes only stoked the women's excitement.

Hana was intimately familiar with Saku's tyrannical personality and eye-for-an-eye mentality, all of which usually distracted her from his looks. Nevertheless, Saku was an attractive man. He couldn't even take a short stroll around town without being cornered by women.

"Alas, if not for his rotten personality, he'd be the perfect catch," Hana lamented, never mind that her own personality was just as lousy. "He's your classic case of a snotty hottie."

"Snotty?" Azuha asked.

Hana nodded vigorously. "You got it. Pretty as a picture until he opens his mouth. His face is the only thing he's got going for him," she said, laughing brightly.

"I see...", a low voice said from behind her.

She turned around to find a solemn-faced Saku. He was holding himself rigidly. There was no hint of laughter in his eyes, and the vein on his temple was throbbing.

"S-Saku... May I ask, since when...?" Hana sputtered, her smile

freezing on her face.

"Sorry about my rotten personality," he spat.

"You heard me?"

"Every word, loud and clear. There I was, waiting for you and putting up with all kinds of harassment, while you've been bad-mouthing me behind my back?"

Damn! Hana swore in her head.

"Errr..." She couldn't make an intelligible sentence. Her eyes darted this way and that, unable to meet Saku's.

As she floundered, the two women who had been flirting with Saku followed him over.

"Hey, what're you doing all the way over here?" one asked.

"Come eat with us," the second one coaxed.

Saku looked between the two women and Hana. Then the wicked grin of someone who just hit on a diabolical scheme rose on his face.

Alarm bells immediately started ringing in Hana's head, but she didn't have time to escape. Before she had the chance to blink, Saku grabbed her, drew her in close, and captured her lips with his.

"Nmm...ah....mmm!" she protested.

Hana struggled against his grip, but Saku didn't budge. He continued to kiss her deeply, putting on a show for the two women. By this point, she was panicking.

Gradually, she lost the energy to resist and could only cling on to Saku helplessly. That was when he finally loosened his grasp.

Hana's cheeks were bright red, and she was out of breath.

In contrast, Saku was in a great mood. He looked at the women. "How long are you planning to watch? I'm on a date with my wife. I don't have time for you."

Ruffled and disgruntled by the passionate kiss, the women rushed off, their faces flushed.

"They're finally gone." Saku huffed, looking satisfied and refreshed. He was still holding her.

Hana had mountains of things she wanted to say to him, but in the end, all of it boiled down to three simple words. "Saku, you idiot!"

"Don't worry," he said, unbothered. "I'm still smarter than you."

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

"Then what?" He grinned mischievously. Hana was starting to hate that expression. "If you don't like it, why don't you push me away?"

He knew very well that she no longer had any energy and was all but leaning on him for support, and he was taunting her on purpose. How sadistic.

"Your face really is the only good thing about you," she said petulantly.

It was all so frustrating.

The gentle way Saku was holding her was even more infuriating.

The cherry on top was that she hadn't hated the kiss, and that was what was driving her crazy most of all.

There was no way she would be admitting that, though.

To anyone watching them, Hana and Saku would have looked like the average lovey-dovey couple. They were still locked in an embrace when they heard someone shout, "Hey, that's Hana!"

Hana turned in the direction of the shout and saw Suzu pointing at them from a distance away. Suzu ran over to join them.

"Suzu?! What are you doing here? What about school?" Hana asked.

"Awww, don't be silly. We only had class in the morning today. I met up with Yuu for a date after school," Suzu explained.

"Yuu?"

Hana glanced behind Suzu to see the gaudy guy whose picture Suzu had shown her before. He looked even more like a player in person.

"Never mind that...," Suzu said, grinning ear to ear at Hana, who was still wrapped up in Saku's arms. "Aren't the two of you sweet together?"

Hana pried herself free in a hurry. "Y-you've got it wrong."

"Don't be shy. I know how much you like him!" Suzu said brightly.

"Oh yeah?" Saku said with a smirk.

"No! Not at all!" Hana denied immediately, alarmed by this latest turn of events.

"Can't be helped if you're madly in love with me," he teased.

"I told you that's not it! There's just weird rumors going around the school!" she said, utterly desperate. "Please, Suzu, I'm begging you to stop talking."

Saku—the jerk—was enjoying himself immensely, having found something new to needle Hana about.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce myself!" Suzu said. "I'm Hana's friend, Suzu Mitsui, and this is my boyfriend, Yuudai Namikawa."

"Wassup?" Yuudai was blond and had ears full of piercings, and his flippant way of speaking matched his frivolous looks. "Yo, you know them, Suzu? Dayum, what a good-looking dude. Can't match up to me, though," he said and cackled.

There might have been cruder people in the world, but Yuudai was far from refined.

"Don't, Yuu," Suzu said. "Lord Ichinomiya is a highly distinguished person."

"Psssh, it's not like he's the prime minister, so who cares?"

But he was wrong. In some respects, Saku had more power than the prime minister could ever dream of having. However, a normal person like Yuudai wouldn't know that.

Suzu understood full well the extent of Saku's authority and bowed

deeply, folding ninety degrees at the waist to apologize for Yuudai's rudeness. "My sincerest apologies, Lord Ichinomiya!"

Yuudai looked on with no hint of remorse as Suzu bowed her head for him. Hana's opinion was sinking lower by the second. *You should be the one apologizing*, she thought.

"It's okay, Suzu," Hana reassured her. "Saku isn't going to get angry at something so minor. Don't worry. You should get back to your date..."

"Hey, whaddaya say to a double date? We were gonna grab a bite to eat anyway," Yuudai said. "Your treat, 'kay, pops?"

Saku's face spasmed.

"Y-Yuu!" Suzu exclaimed in horror.

"You wanna eat with your friend, right, Suzu?"

"I mean, yeah, but..."

"So let's go." Yuudai laid an overly familiar hand on Saku's shoulder. "You're the oldest by a mile, so obvs you're gonna treat us, right?"

Hana and Suzu hovered anxiously, waiting for Saku to explode. Yuudai had clearly gone too far this time. But contrary to their expectations, not only did Saku keep a rein on his temper, he even agreed to lunch. They were both surprised at his concession. Suzu looked so happy that Hana couldn't very well be the one to turn down the invitation.

As they were heading to the restaurant Yuudai had suggested, Hana asked Saku, "Are you really okay with this? I thought for sure you would get angry at his attitude. If he had talked to me that way, I might've punched him."

She wouldn't have held back, either. She would have sent him flying. And it was anyone's guess whether she would have stopped at one punch.

"Yes, his manners leave much to be desired, but I want to keep an eye on him for now," Saku answered.

"Did you notice something?" Hana asked.

"He smells like blood."

"Blood?" She hadn't smelled anything of the sort. "Are you sure you weren't imagining it?"

"No, I wasn't. Call it practitioner's instincts. There's something unusual about him," Saku said confidently.

Hana couldn't refute his self-assured proclamation. Saku was leagues above her in terms of both skill and depth of experience. Who was she to dismiss the instincts of a Fifth Color practitioner?

"Of all people, he had to be Suzu's boyfriend...", she mumbled. Suzu's overjoyed, lovestruck face rose to Hana's mind. There was nothing for her to say. "I hope it turns out to be nothing..."

As Suzu's friend, Hana could do nothing but pray for the best.

The four of them went to lunch.

The restaurant Yuudai picked turned out to be extravagant and expensive. It wasn't the kind of establishment a high school student could set foot in on a whim.

Hana didn't know if Yuudai had chosen it deliberately because Saku was footing the bill, but were that the case, then Yuudai was straight-up trash.

Of course, he had already revealed his true colors when he had boldly imposed himself on Saku, a person he had only just met.

Saku hadn't batted an eye at the prices. Money wasn't an issue for Saku, considering he was the leader of the entire Ichinomiya group. However, Yuudai's audacity weighed on Hana's mind.

Nonetheless, Hana was relieved to finally sit down after an entire morning on her feet. She relaxed into her seat and let out a sigh of relief.

The entire time they were waiting for their food, Yuudai kept up his insolent attitude. He casually disrespected Saku time and time again. Every time, Suzu apologized on his behalf.

Suzu had told Hana that Yuudai was handsome and sweet, but—no offense to her friend—Hana truly didn't understand what Suzu saw in him.

And yet Suzu looked at Yuudai with hearts in her eyes. When Hana saw Suzu having so much fun, she didn't know how to feel.

As Suzu's friend, Hana was worried about her. She knew she should warn her against dating scum like Yuudai. However, she was scared Suzu would hate her for saying something like that.

Hana grew increasingly fed up with Yuudai's rude words and behavior throughout the meal. Finally, they finished eating and left the restaurant.

"Hot damn, that was good," Yuudai said.

"Thank you for treating us, Lord Ichinomiya," Suzu said to Saku. "Yuu, you have to thank him, too."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," Saku said.

"That's what the man said. Adults sure are generous," Yuudai said.

Hana watched Yuudai refuse to say a word of thanks even as he stood next to Suzu, who was bowing courteously. That was the last straw.

Hana took a good look at Suzu and saw that her expression was sad.

Unable to take it anymore, Hana grabbed Suzu by the hand and dragged her away, saying, "Bathroom. Be right back."

She was leaving Saku alone with Yuudai, but Saku could handle himself.

Hana took Suzu with her to the bathroom, but she didn't have any particular plan. She didn't know what to say. She had just wanted to take Suzu away from there.

Silence lay thick between them.

Then Suzu said softly, "I'm sorry, Hana. I got in the way of your date."

"But you're not the one at fault. No matter how you look at it, the one who..." Hana trailed off noncommittally, but the damage had been done.

"Yuu was kind at the beginning, really. I swear. But he's changed since we started dating. He's like another person..."

"What did you think about the way he acted today, Suzu?"

"...He was out of line. I couldn't believe it," Suzu mumbled. It looked like it was hard for her to admit.

"So you understand. As your friend, I can't believe he's your boyfriend. But that's just how I feel. It's what you think that matters. What do you want to do? Do you really want to keep dating someone like him?"

"..." Suzu didn't respond at first, her words lodging in her throat.

"I'll support whatever you choose," Hana continued. "It doesn't matter if it's wrong or right—I want you to pick whatever will make you happy, whatever will make you smile at the end of the day. And if you need someone to talk to, I'm here for you at any time."

"Hana..." Suzu's eyes were wet. She sniffled quietly, and tears dripped down her cheeks.

All Hana could do was stroke her head gently.

But before long, Suzu's usual sunny smile returned to her face. "Thanks, Hana. I'll think it over properly."

"Good. You've got a good head on your shoulders, despite the way you look. I know you'll be okay."

"What do you mean 'despite the way I look'?" Suzu said sullenly, and Hana laughed out loud.

The two of them returned to where Saku and Yuudai were waiting to find the two guys chatting excitedly.

Well, actually, the only one who seemed to be having fun was Yuudai. Saku looked like he was holding himself back from exploding.

Hana and Suzu rushed over before Saku could hit his breaking point.

While Suzu talked to Yuudai, Hana asked Saku, "Are you okay?"

"Does it look like I'm okay?" he retorted.

"Um, you look like you're one second away from losing it," she said.

Saku's forced smile was scaring her. She had him drop it while he was talking to her.

"But it wasn't all for nothing," Saku said.

"What?"

"He's acquainted with all of the previous victims."

"Huh?!" Hana blurted loudly in surprise. She quickly slapped both hands over her mouth.

She glanced over at Suzu. Once she was assured that they weren't paying attention, she lowered her hands.

"Is that related to the blood scent?" Hana asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but it's something I can't ignore. How much do you know about him?"

"Just that he's Suzu's boyfriend. Nothing else."

Saku tsked.

"Should I try to discreetly ask Suzu about him?" she asked.

"Best not. In the worst-case scenario, we might end up involving her as well."

"Then what do we do?"

"We put a tail on him and investigate whether or not he's connected to the incidents. That's all we can do. As a precaution, you should tell your friend she shouldn't meet up with him until we wrap up the case."

"Seriously. Of all the guys in the world." Hana huffed.

Yuudai was proving to be a grade-A troublemaker. Hana would curse him to eternity and back if Suzu actually ended up tangled up in the case because of him.

Hana had originally planned to make a speedy escape after lunch. However, she now felt that it was too dangerous to leave Suzu alone with Yuudai, so they continued on their double date.

Hana was on high alert, since anything could happen at any moment. Her eyebrows gradually drew together in consternation.

Saku poked the point between her brows. She blinked, startled, and locked eyes with him. He was smiling gently at her. "You'll exhaust yourself if you're hyper-focused all the time. Ease up."

"Easy for you to say."

How could Hana relax when Suzu could be in danger?

"Don't worry. I'm here, aren't I? And as long as I am, I'll protect both you and your friend," Saku declared. There was no end to his confidence.

Reassured by his promise, she felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. Saku had an arrogant streak and could be holier-than-thou, but she felt relieved from the bottom of her heart.

They hadn't been together long, but at some point, she had grown to trust him.

Saku laid a large and warm hand on Hana's head. She drew strength from its comforting weight.

“Okay, then. Don’t you dare slack off,” she said with a tiny smile.

They shopped around for a while. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. Then they finally left the shopping center and headed back.

All that was left was to see Suzu home. Hana was planning to find an opening before they parted to give Suzu the broad strokes and convince her not to meet with Yuudai for the time being. She thought about how to break the news as they walked.

The sun was setting, and the shadows were starting to lengthen. The time of reckoning.

The group was approaching a wide, open lot when it appeared.

Saku was the first to notice.

He abruptly stopped dead in his tracks and scanned their surroundings.

“What’s wrong, Saku?” Hana asked. At the same time, Suzu and Yuudai both stopped as well.

“Hana?” Suzu asked.

“What’s up?” Yuudai said.

They were both looking inquisitively at Saku.

The next moment—

“Run!” Saku shouted just as a large black shadow emerged from the surrounding gloom and charged toward them.

“Eeeyaaah—!” Suzu shrieked.

“Wh-what is that?!” Yuudai screamed.

The two of them ran for the empty lot in panic. The mysterious apparition changed directions as if it was tracking them.

“Wh-what the hell?!” Yuudai yelled.

“Yuu!”

They ran away from their pursuer, nearly neck and neck, but Suzu was a tad slower. Suzu grabbed Yuudai’s arm, possibly to seek his help, but he shook her off.

“Let go of me!” he said.

“Aah!” Suzu cried. Yuudai had been too forceful, and she fell to the ground.

The black shadow stopped in front of her.

“Ah—...” Suzu’s face went white with fear. She desperately tried to regain her footing, but it was no use. Her legs had given out. She remained sitting and scrambled backward.

“Suzu!” Instinct drove Hana to throw herself between her friend and the attacker.

“Barrier!” Saku yelled, his voice thick with anxiety.

A protective barrier instantaneously went up around Hana and Suzu. When Hana realized the barrier was Saku’s doing, she was relieved.

She looked around them and realized Saku had put up a barrier

around Yuudai, too. Yuudai was blinking in surprise.

For some reason, the phantom ignored Hana and Suzu even though they were right in front of it. It was focused solely on Yuudai and charged toward him in a determined pursuit.

Its first attack shook Saku's barrier but was absorbed. However, any practitioner could tell that the barrier would not hold out for long.

Saku unleashed his full power on their attacker, intent on ending the battle as quickly as possible. His attack found its mark.

"Growarrrr," the shadow howled in anguish. It writhed in pain and began to take on a more distinct shape.

A dog? No...a wolf?

Yes, its final form was that of a humongous black wolf.

The wolf's eyes were bloodshot, and its expression twisted with hatred. It glowered at Yuudai with single-minded intent.

Although Saku had been the one who had hurt the wolf, it didn't even look at him. Instead, it hurled itself at Yuudai. Once again, it was thwarted by Saku's barrier.

Inside the barrier, Yuudai was rooted to the ground by fear and didn't make any attempt to run.

"Aoi," Hana called, and Aoi appeared instantly. "Take Suzu home."

"What will you do, Master?" Aoi asked.

"I'm going to help Saku take that thing down. What else?"

Aoi looked displeased, most likely upset with the idea of having to leave the scene.

"She's a very important friend of mine," Hana implored. "I'm trusting you with her safety, Aoi. Please."

"That's unfair, Master. You know I can't say no after hearing something like that." Aoi was reluctant, but he still lifted Suzu up from where she was sitting on the ground.

"Huh? Hana? Who's this?" Suzu asked.

"My shikigami. It's dangerous to stay here, so I'm getting you away ASAP."

"What about you, Hana?"

Hana smiled but didn't respond. "Aoi, I'm counting on you," she said.

"Got it," he replied.

"Hana!" Suzu screamed, struggling to get free of Aoi's arms.

Hana stretched a hand toward Suzu. "I'll explain everything later." She swept her hand down in front of Suzu's face. Suzu's eyelids slowly closed, and she went limp.

Hana signaled Aoi with her eyes, and he nodded. With Suzu in his arms, he darted away from the lot.

Once Hana saw them off, she ran toward Saku.

The barrier around Yuudai was going to break at any moment. Saku

attacked the wolf with all his might, but nothing he did distracted the wolf from Yuudai.

Finally, the barrier shattered.

Hana launched herself toward Yuudai as if she were going to tackle him. She intercepted the bite that had been meant for Yuudai. The wolf's fangs closed around her arm.

"Tch. Aaaggghhh!" The pain was so horrible that she saw stars.

Simultaneously, the wolf's memories and emotions flooded into her, flashing through her mind like a movie reel.

The wolf was suffering. It was in pain. Hana felt a loathing from it so visceral as to be indescribable, but the hatred was wrapped up in a kindness that was both tender and sad.

Hana couldn't bear the pain in her arm any longer and toppled to the ground.

"Hana!" Saku screamed.

To Hana, his voice seemed like it was coming from far away. She felt as if she was going to pass out soon, but that wasn't a luxury she could afford.

If what she was experiencing was reality, then she had to put an end to it.

Hana saw that Saku was poised to strike the wolf again. She raised herself up, gritting her teeth in pain.

He must not continue to fight it.

"Don't, Saku! The being before you is an inugami that's been turned into a tatarigami," Hana shouted.

The being in front of them used to be a dog deity that had been corrupted into a spirit of curses and destruction.

Saku paused in the middle of his attack. "Tatarigami? Are you sure?!"

Saku shifted into a defensive stance and erected several layers of barriers around him and Yuudai, who was sitting on the ground.

Hana ignored the injury on her arm and stepped into Saku's barrier to grab Yuudai by his collar.

"All of this happened because of him. Because of them!" she yelled.

Hana glared at Yuudai, the flames of anger dancing in her eyes.

He squealed, "Eek."

"He and the other victims... No, it's ridiculous to call them victims... The other three targets killed the dogs whose bodies were recently found around here!" Hana said.

"Is that true?!" Saku asked Yuudai, his voice laced with impatience.

Yuudai didn't respond but shrank back in fear.

At the end of her patience, Hana headbutted Yuudai. "Fess up! You guys are the culprits, right?!"

Overwhelmed by Hana's intimidating aura, Yuudai nodded and

reluctantly confessed, “Th-that’s right. We killed them...”

“You idiots!” Hana shouted. Then she punched him in the face, throwing her entire body into the attack.

“Guh!” Yuudai toppled backward and fainted.

Hana huffed and looked down at Yuudai. She wanted to punch him more, but this wasn’t the time.

The tatarigami continued its assaults on Saku’s barriers, trying to break through.

Saku faced the former inugami, which had been reduced to a shadow of itself. He furrowed his brow. “A tatarigami, huh...? What a nuisance.”

Tatarigami, fallen though they may be, were once divine beings. It would not be so easy for a human to purify a deity, not even for a Fifth Color practitioner like Saku.

In addition, the act of purifying a deity was akin to...killing it. God-slaying was not a light burden to bear, and Saku would have had to shoulder it himself. On top of that, it was impossible to know what the repercussions would be until the deed was done.

The risk was extreme.

“Shit. What do I do...?” Saku cursed. Naturally, even he balked at the idea of killing a deity.

But Hana didn’t have any intention of letting Saku go through with it. She left the safety of the barrier to stand before the tatarigami.

“Hana!” Saku yelled in panic, but Hana did not take her eyes off the tatarigami.

She wrapped her arms around its neck and created a barrier to restrain it. The tatarigami struggled wildly, but she clung on with all her strength.

“Azuha! Miyabi!” she shouted.

Azuha reacted without delay and flew high above their heads. She scattered a shower of glittering scales down upon them with large flaps of her rainbow wings.

Miyabi manifested near the tatarigami. In her hand, she held a wand of kagura bells, an instrument with three tiers of small bells Shinto priestesses used in ritual dances. She shook the wand. The rhythmic chiming of the bells seemed to have a pacifying effect on the inugami and helped bring it back to its senses.

The inugami had originally been a benevolent deity that lived in this area.

However, it was precisely because of its gentle nature that it hadn’t been able to ignore the hatred and resentment of the slain dogs and had accepted their memories and emotions into itself instead.

But the memories had been too many and the grudges too powerful; they had consumed the inugami until it turned into a tatarigami.

“There’s no need for you to bear this burden,” Hana told the inugami. “You should not have to suffer over the crimes of these men. They are not worth it.”

The inugami howled and then spoke for the first time. “...But I do suffer. I am filled with pain and loathing. The hatred is so fierce, I fear it will burn me up. Only the lives of those men can quench the flames,” it wailed in sorrow. “Kill me. Kill me, so that I will not fall lower than I already have. I do not want to feel this resentment. I do not want to hurt anyone...”

It wasn’t fair that such a compassionate deity should suffer because of those rotten men.

“You have not fallen yet. Return to being the kind deity you have always been,” Hana implored.

“Impossible. The memories of the pitiful souls I have taken into me are strong, and they are slowly eating me up. I empathize too much with their pain. I can no longer tell where they end and I begin.”

“I understand. Then leave it to me,” Hana said.

She dropped the barrier around the tatarigami and began to transfer her power into it instead.

This was different from when she shared her power with Azuha and Saku to make them stronger. This time, her goal was to enhance the innate powers of the corrupted inugami.

Powers that were purifying, that could turn the waters of a stagnant pool crystal clear again.

However, that alone wasn’t enough.

“Miyabi, a dance, if you please,” Hana said.

“Very well, Master.”

Miyabi began to shake the kagura bells. She whirled in time to the chimes, dancing in circles around the tatarigami.

The beautiful ringing of the bells reverberated through their surroundings, and every flutter of the celestial robe Miyabi wore purified the tatarigami a little further.

Hana continued pouring her power into the deity. At the same time, she looked for the border between the inugami and the poisonous resentment that it had merged with. It was an intricate operation, like threading a needle, which required precise control of her power.

The noises around her diminished to nothing as she focused all of her attention on the hunt. Finally, she found what she was looking for.

Thanks to Miyabi’s dance of purification, Hana located the boundary between the inugami and the slain dogs’ hatred that the former deity had absorbed into itself. She shoved her power at the boundary and peeled the inugami away from the wrathful mass.

She was thrown backward violently, but Saku caught her.

Lying in Hana’s arms was the true form of the inugami, freed from

the deep hostility of the dogs. The spirit that had been twice Hana's height had turned into a puppy that fit snugly in the nest of her arms.

She sighed in relief, but it wasn't over yet. She looked up.

A swirling mass remained where the deity had stood. It was the condensed animosity that had corrupted the inugami. Left alone, it would turn into a shade and go on to cause more harm and destruction.

But before that final transformation happened, it could still be saved.

"Miyabi, purify it," Hana ordered.

Miyabi held the kagura bells up to the sky in supplication. The sound of the bells was clear and refreshing. Through the ritual, Miyabi cleansed the fierce anger of the dogs. The jumble of negative energy dissipated toward the sky.

The inugami and Hana both watched as it disappeared with sadness in their eyes.

"Is it...over...?" Saku asked. Surprise was scrawled across his face, unable to believe what he had just seen.

Hana looked down at the inugami resting in her arms and asked, "Are you okay now?"

"Yes, you saved me. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart," it said and licked Hana's face.

Hana giggled at the ticklish sensation, but in the next moment, she grimaced, her expression turning awkward. "...Actually, there's one more thing. I don't know how to say this, but..."

"What is it?" the god asked.

"You know how I had to share a great amount of my power with you in order to separate your essence from the dogs' hatred, right?"

"Yes, I recall."

"Since you were already weakened, my power ended up surpassing yours, and against my expectations, the transfer ended up having a subjugating effect of sorts..."

"Don't tell me...", Saku interjected with a pained expression.

The inugami cocked its head, not understanding what Hana was implying.

"Er, basically, you've become one of my shikigami," Hana said.

Saku covered his face with his hand and muttered, "You can't be serious..."

"I want to set you free if possible, but a bond has already formed between us, and it might be difficult to sever. I'm really sorry!"

The bond had been forged by sheer accident. Hana hadn't intended for any such thing to happen.

"I don't mind. I myself had been wondering how to repay your kindness," the inugami said. "I shall serve as your shikigami as long as

you live.”

Hana breathed a sigh of relief. The inugami had accepted the situation with much less resistance than she had expected.

Saku, on the other hand, couldn't hide his shock. “Are you serious?! You—a deity—are going to serve a human being?”

“What's your problem, Saku? There's no need to shout,” Hana grouched.

“I can hardly stay quiet about this. We are talking about a bona fide god here,” Saku insisted. “It's on a completely different level from the shikigami we practitioners conjure with our own power.”

“If the inugami is fine with the arrangement, then I don't see any issues,” Hana said flippantly.

Saku's astonishment was far from unusual.

Deities were prideful beings. There had been practitioners in the past who had been served by deities, but the master-shikigami relationship wasn't one deities acquiesced to lightly.

The circumstances Hana and the inugami had been bonded under may have been out of her control, but even so, had the inugami been displeased, it could have killed Hana for the slight as a form of divine retribution.

The gods did not easily accept the idea of working for a human.

But Hana hadn't given any thought to Saku's shock and had shrugged it off. Instead, she was having a happy-go-lucky conversation with the inugami. “If you're going to be my shikigami, I have to give you a name!” she said. “How about Arashi? It's a cool name, don't you think?”

“Arashi. Yes, it is a good name,” the inugami agreed.

“Saku, I can bring this one home with me, right?” Hana asked as if she were asking for permission to take in an abandoned puppy.

“Do whatever you want...” Saku was completely at a loss for words. “I'm exhausted... Let's just go home.”

He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to bind the injury on Hana's arm. Blood was still welling up from where Arashi had bitten her, and it quickly dyed the cloth red.

“We should take you to the hospital first,” he said.

“Sorry,” Arashi apologized dejectedly.

“It's just a small wound. Nothing to worry about,” Hana reassured the inugami and patted its head gently. “Miyabi, Azuha, we're going home!”

The two shikigami came immediately to her side when she called, but she couldn't shake the feeling there was something she was forgetting.

At that exact moment, she heard a gasp. Yuudai had collapsed on the ground a distance away, but now he regained consciousness.

“Where’s the monster?!” he shouted. “Holy sh— My nose is bleeding!”

Saku, who was forced to remember Yuudai’s existence now that he was awake and screaming, said, “We forgot to deal with him.”

“What should we do? We’re not going to let him off, right?” Hana asked.

Yuudai and his accomplices had taken numerous lives. It was because of them that a divine being had been reduced to a mere tatarigami. Hana’s anger wouldn’t be quelled until she saw them punished for their crimes.

“Don’t worry. I’ll have an officer I know come and take him away,” Saku said and left to make the call.

They waited in the empty lot until the police officer came, and they handed Yuudai over. Yuudai never stopped making a fuss, but in the end, the police arrested him as the culprit behind the dog killings and took him away in the back of the patrol car.

“He will be judged in the court of human law. Considering our laws, it’s possible he’s going to get off with a slap on the wrist, but I hope you will satisfy yourself with that much. Killing him is not something...”

“That’s good enough.” The inugami...no, Arashi had once possessed so much hatred that it had wanted to see the four men dead, but now its eyes were peaceful and kind.

Arashi’s gentle gaze reassured Hana as she finally headed home.



Hana returned to the Ichinomiya residence with the inugami and her shikigami in tow.

Even Mio was shocked by the turn of events, but she still accepted Arashi into the family. Arashi got along with Hana’s other shikigami as well.

As for Hana, she developed a high fever and was bedridden by the bite wound she had taken in Yuudai’s stead.

Arashi felt terribly contrite, since it had been the inugami’s fault, and kept vigil by Hana’s side the entire time, which only had the effect of making Hana feel guilty in turn.

After a few days, Hana recovered and was able to return to school.

Since she had been absent for so long, when she got to school, Suzu approached her right away, wearing an anxious expression.

“Are you okay now, Hana?” Suzu asked.

“Fit as a fiddle,” Hana answered.

While Hana had been sleeping off her fever, Saku had outlined the

case to Suzu. Suzu had been surprised at first, but as an aspirational practitioner herself, she came around before long.

The two of them had spoken several times on the phone once Hana's fever had come down. Hana finally told Suzu about Aoi and Miyabi. Suzu had scolded her for being distant and keeping her powers a secret.

Once Suzu was able to vent her frustrations, she returned to being her usual self.

Hana was deeply relieved. It was a great comfort to her that Suzu was still the same no matter whether Hana was powerful or not.

"By the way, did you hear about your boyfriend, Suzu?" Hana asked.

The police had arrested Yuudai and his one remaining coconspirator.

The two of their actions had caused a tatarigami to be born, an unforgivable crime. The Association of Practitioners had mobilized their full forces to gather evidence, and they had been convicted in record time.

Hana had heard the news just that morning and had come to school worried about how Suzu was taking it. However, Suzu was perfectly nonchalant instead of being despondent.

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend anymore," Suzu said.

"Huh?"

"As soon as I heard everything that happened from Lord Ichinomiya, I lost any shred of feeling I ever had for Yuu. I wrote him a letter telling him we're through and asked Lord Ichinomiya to help me deliver it. He and I no longer have anything to do with each other."

"When in the world...?"

"The way he treated those animals is unforgivable. Even a love a hundred years strong would have evaporated in an instant in the face of such cruelty," Suzu declared with conviction.

Seeing Suzu look so free and unburdened, Hana felt a weight lift off her shoulders.

With the cases closed and Saku dealing with the rest of the cleanup, there was nothing left for Hana to do.

Her latest hobby was now loafing around at home and burying her face in her new shikigami's fur. It was the ultimate bliss.

Arashi's fur was indescribably soft, and the inugami never said a word of complaint. Hana was free to enjoy Arashi's fluffy fur as much as she liked.

She was doing just that one day when she heard someone say, "Don't be such a bum."

Hana lifted her head to see Saku watching her with an exasperated

expression.

“Do you want to try, Saku?” Hana asked.

“No need,” he replied bluntly.

“Arashi’s fur is like a cloud. Once is enough to hook you. You won’t want to do anything else.”

“Never mind that. More importantly, the barrier around the pillar has stabilized.”

Now that the incidents had been resolved, Saku also had more time on his hands. Recently, they had been continuously transferring their energy into the barrier around the pillar.

At last, they could reap the reward of their efforts.

“You mean I’m free from my obligations?” Hana asked.

“Yes. I no longer need your support from here on out. I can maintain the barrier by myself.”

“Woo-hoo!” Hana threw her hands up in the air, practically jumping for joy. “We can terminate our contract, then. I trust you didn’t forget about the reward you promised me, right?” she asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“Of course. I’ll compensate you properly,” Saku said.

“Score! Then let’s fill out the divorce papers ASAP.”

Hana felt a fleeting loneliness at the thought of cutting off her relationship with Saku, but she shook it off and focused on her happiness at finally obtaining her freedom. She felt like she was on top of the world.

But Saku’s response threw Hana from heaven straight to hell. “No.”

“Huh?” she said.

“We won’t get divorced.”

“Excuse me?”

She didn’t understand what Saku was saying.

Their marriage had only been a contract for the purpose of fixing the barrier. The barrier was whole once more, which meant Hana had fulfilled her duties.

But Saku was still refusing to get divorced.

“What are you talking about?!” Hana demanded. Her good mood from a second ago had blown away, leaving behind only confusion and questions.

“It’s what’s written in the contract, though,” Saku said.

“What?”

Hana scrambled to take out the contract between the two of them and read it once more from top to bottom.

Her eyes stopped on the last two lines. They had been added as a supplementary clause when Saku had asked for her help in the recent incident.

The first condition was written as they had discussed. In recompense

for Hana's help, upon successful resolution of the case, she would receive an oceanside villa.

However, Hana didn't remember laying eyes on the final sentence in the contract.

"...Any and all compensation will be paid upon completion of the contracted obligations, but any requests to divorce will not be recognized. The two parties will continue their relationship as husband and wife?! 'Objections should be submitted within three days of this clause's addition?'"

Hana looked to Saku for answers.

"Exactly. The three-day period passed, and you never said anything. Therefore, we will remain married from here on out," Saku said.

"Y-you cheater!" Hana blurted out.

"That's slander. You're the one at fault for not reading the contract carefully."

"But—but... You're not wrong, but..."

It was true that it had been Hana's responsibility to check over the contract, but never could she have imagined that Saku would add in something so nefarious.

"So that's that. Till death do us part. Right, honey?"

"Whyyy? How could you do this all of a sudden? Come on. After we divorce, you can find a bombshell to be your next wife. You should have no problems finding a beauty to marry. What do you say?" she begged.

Saku smirked impishly at Hana, who was still befuddled by the news. He reached out to caress her cheek. His heavy and intent gaze sent a shiver down her spine.

"I'm starting to get serious about you, Hana," Saku said.

"I don't understand what—," she began to say.

Before she could finish her thought, Saku shut her up with a kiss. It was but a momentary touch of the lips, but it was enough to put an end to her protests.

"I want you. Not just on paper, not as a lie. I want you to be my real wife and I your husband."

The passion in his eyes pierced through Hana. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"Hurry up and fall in love with me, Hana."

Saku smiled devilishly.

Hana thought she might faint.

Please let this be a dream, she fervently prayed.

Then Saku's lips touched hers again, and she stopped thinking completely.

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